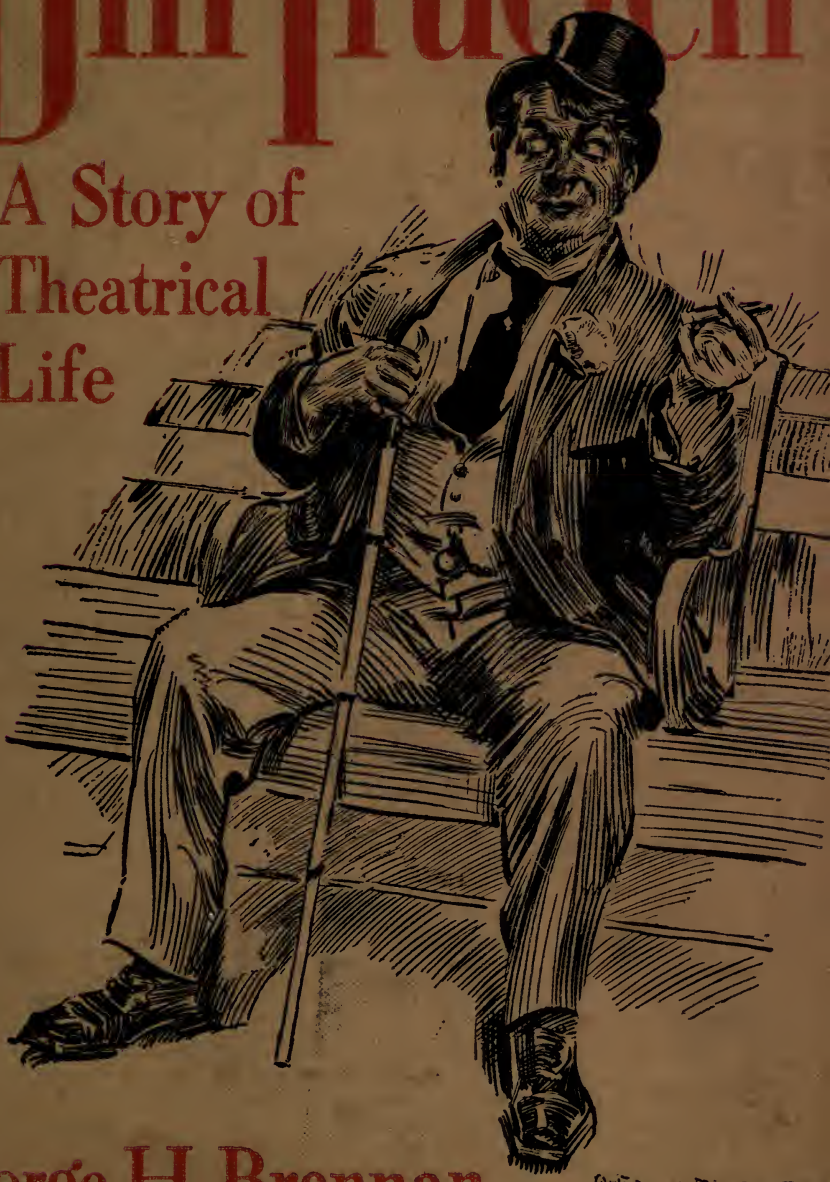
Bill Truetell

A Story of Theatrical Life



George H. Brennan

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
DAVIS

Fred'k G. Stiles

To my very dear friends
Fred. G. Stiles

George H. Brennan
March 27, 1928

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
DAVIS

Fred'k G. Stiles

To my very dear friend
Fred. G. Stiles

George H. Brennan
March 27, 1928

BILL TRUETELL

A STORY OF

THEATRICAL LIFE

"Bill Smiled upon the Shrinking Figure so Reassuringly that the Radiance from his Kindly Countenance Dried Her Eyes." [Page 22]

BILL TRUETELL

A STORY OF THEATRICAL LIFE

BY

GEORGE H. BRENNAN

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN COLOR AND TWENTY-THREE DRAWINGS IN THE TEXT BY JAMES MONTGOMERY FLAGG

CHICAGO
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
1909

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
DAVIS

COPYRIGHT
A. C. McCLURG & CO.
1909

PUBLISHED FEBRUARY, 1909

The Lakeside Press
R. R. DONNELLEY & SONS COMPANY
CHICAGO

TO

MARION ASHWORTH BRENNAN

CONTENTS

Chapter		Page
I.	Launching "The Gay Gothamites"	11
II.	The Little Van Balken	18
III.	Miss Snapper's Foot	26
IV.	Some Successful Expedients	37
V.	Mine Host Goes Along	56
VI.	An Addition to the Company	65
VII.	The Singing Landlords	75
VIII.	Debut of the New Male Chorus	87
IX.	The Mecca of Vermont	93
X.	A "Legitimate" Star	103
XI.	A Girl Becomes Sacred	114
XII.	Fort Benson Surrenders	121
XIII.	The New "Op'ry" House	134
XIV.	Playing "She Stoops"	145
XV.	The New "Osric"	158
XVI.	The Rival of Shakespeare	170
XVII.	Doing the Dane	180
XVIII.	Pussy and the Prince	190
XIX.	The Mighty Fallen	200
XX.	Counting the Ties	221
XXI.	Down and Out	243
XXII.	The Imp of Suicide	258
XXIII.	Making His "Last Jump"	266
XXIV.	Bill in Heaven	275

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

"BILL GAZED UPON THE SHRINKING FIGURE SO RE-ASSURINGLY THAT THE RADIANCE FROM HIS KINDLY COUNTENANCE DRIED HER EYES" *Frontispiece*

"GAZING INQUIRINGLY AT HIS WEATHER-BEATEN IMAGE" 13

"'WHAT! YOU WANT YOUR FEE BEFORE YOU'VE ATTENDED TO THE CASE?'" 29

"THE STATION AGENT STARED ABOUT LIKE A PERSON AWAKENING FROM A TRANCE" 48

"SHE CONDESCENDED TO NOTICE HIS PRESENCE BY ASKING, 'IS IT HEAVY?'" 61

"'BEG PARDON,' APOLOGIZED THE MANAGER, 'GUESS I 'VE INTRUDED'" 71

"THEY WERE IN TRUTH A SINGULAR EXHIBIT" . . 79

"'THEY MUST BE ON,' HE MUTTERED IN AGITATION, PRESSING HIS EAR CLOSER TO THE KEYHOLE" . . 91

"HIS BAGGAGE AND SCENERY STACKED IN THE SHAPE OF A MOUND" 98

"'COME WITH ME, TRUETELL. I NEED A MANAGER'" 109

"THE LITTLE VAN BALKEN FOLDED HER ARMS, STRUTTING TRAGICALLY ABOUT THE ROOM" 118

"'AH, RUPE,' HE EXCLAIMED. 'MY OLD FRIEND RUPE!'" 132

COLONEL FROTHINGHAM 137

"THERE WAS A LOUD CRASH, AND LADY AND TREE WENT OVER TOGETHER" 153

ILLUSTRATIONS

PAGE

"BILL GAZED UPON THE SHRINKING FIGURE SO RE-ASSURINGLY THAT THE RADIANCE FROM HIS KINDLY COUNTENANCE DRIED HER EYES" *Frontispiece*

"GAZING INQUIRINGLY AT HIS WEATHER-BEATEN IMAGE" 13

"'WHAT! YOU WANT YOUR FEE BEFORE YOU'VE ATTENDED TO THE CASE?'" 29

"THE STATION AGENT STARED ABOUT LIKE A PERSON AWAKENING FROM A TRANCE" 48

"SHE CONDESCENDED TO NOTICE HIS PRESENCE BY ASKING, 'IS IT HEAVY?'" 61

"'BEG PARDON,' APOLOGIZED THE MANAGER, 'GUESS I 'VE INTRUDED'" 71

"THEY WERE IN TRUTH A SINGULAR EXHIBIT" . . 79

"'THEY MUST BE ON,' HE MUTTERED IN AGITATION, PRESSING HIS EAR CLOSER TO THE KEYHOLE" . . 91

"HIS BAGGAGE AND SCENERY STACKED IN THE SHAPE OF A MOUND" 98

"'COME WITH ME, TRUETELL. I NEED A MANAGER'" 109

"THE LITTLE VAN BALKEN FOLDED HER ARMS, STRUTTING TRAGICALLY ABOUT THE ROOM" 118

"'AH, RUPE,' HE EXCLAIMED. 'MY OLD FRIEND RUPE!'" 132

COLONEL FROTHINGHAM 137

"THERE WAS A LOUD CRASH, AND LADY AND TREE WENT OVER TOGETHER" 153

ILLUSTRATIONS—*Continued*

"'You 're Five Minutes Late,' he Growled" . . 167
"'I'm Pleased to See You, Pleased to See You'" 173
"She Stepped Back in Pretty Confusion, Seeking the Close Shelter of the Wall" 183
"Mr. Steelson was Petrified in the Tragic Attitude he had Struck" 191
"'Ye Gods! Ye Gods!'" 217
"The Star Straightway Dropped on One Knee, and Raised her Head 239
"The Hand of the Manager Met the Warm Clasp of the Star". 253
"With his Hat Pulled Low on his Forehead, and his Overcoat Collar Turned High about his Neck 267
"She Dropped to her Knees by his Bedside" . 281

Bill Truetell

BILL TRUETELL

CHAPTER I

LAUNCHING "THE GAY GOTHAMITES"

BILL TRUETELL stood in front of a discolored mirror that rested on an equally discolored bureau in his little hall-bedroom three flights up in a theatrical lodging house on Thirty-eighth Street, New York. He was dressed for the Rialto save the adjustment of his black four-in-hand tie, which, though worn to a shiny, threadbare state through long and faithful service, now stubbornly refused to submit to the tying operation. Holding an end of the cravat in each hand Bill pulled and strained until his face grew red and his expression desperate. Gritting his teeth he tugged at the obstinate tie as though bent on self-strangulation, but all in vain. Obliged at last to pause for breath, he utilized the interval in making a critical survey of his features in the looking-glass.

Bill's countenance clearly bespoke the vicissitudes of his profession. Twenty years of worry and failure

had eaten across his forehead many a deep furrow, every one representing a show venture that had been taken out on the road by him loaded with rosy hopes and prospects, only to be wound up by unfeeling sheriffs loaded with fatal writs and attachments. Theatrical shipwrecks were his specialty; yet, in the days when "shoestring" management flourished, Bill was a king among his brethren. During that palmy period of the drama a manager possessed of a surplus over the amount of money required to move his attraction to the first stand was regarded with distrust by the fraternity. Of such suspicion Bill was never the object. On the contrary, he sometimes lacked the price of the initial transportation of his troupe, and that was his condition on this September morning, when his four-in-hand became so strangely unmanageable.

In the respite from his physical exertions before the mirror Bill's thoughts earnestly directed themselves to the problem of how to launch his latest enterprise, "The Gay Gothamites," scheduled to open in two days in Branton, Connecticut, where the attraction was alliteratively billed as a "Merry Melange of Mirth and Melody." The distance from New York to Branton is not more than twenty-five miles and the weather was well suited to pedestrianism, yet Bill could not reasonably ask the actors to accomplish the distance on foot, not only in view of the fact that Branton was the first town in the itinerary but also because

his company's walking powers might well be reserved for a similar emergency later in the season.

"Gazing Inquiringly at his Weather-beaten Image"

"How can I get them there with only ninety cents in my jeans?" mused Bill, gazing inquiringly at his

weather-beaten image. The weather-beaten image, quite as much perplexed as its original, offered no solution. Despairingly, Bill again gripped the ends of his tie and gave them a sudden, powerful yank. To his amazement, the obstinate piece of neckwear became immediately obedient and slipped into its proper position. Simultaneously an inspiration slipped into Bill's mind.

"I 've got it!" he exclaimed. "I 'll touch Reece."

The object of Bill's prospective "touching" operation was the local manager who presided over the destinies of the Branton "Op'ry" House and posted the show bills in that quaint town. He was an old friend of Bill's; this fact, in Bill's sanguine judgment, precluded any chance of the failure of his inspiration.

Acting on the happy impulse forthwith, he hastened to the nearest telegraph office and sent the following message:

JOHN REECE,
MANAGER OPERA HOUSE, BRANTON, CT.
Need fifty to make your town.
BILL TRUETELL.

Old friendship is one thing; an abrupt demand for fifty dollars quite another. The local manager at Branton experienced a chilling sensation in the region of his spine when he read the telegram. If Bill could have seen his face at that moment he would have

searched in vain for any evidence denoting friendship either of the old-time or up-to-date variety.

"Touching me before he opens! Not for mine," was Reece's savage comment. "He must think I 'm the dead easiest thing on earth.'

Actuated by this inimical spirit he wired as follows:

BILL TRUETELL,

NEW YORK. *Am over seven.*

REECE.

Bill grinned on receipt of this sarcastic reply. "It will take another good bluff to land him."

Half an hour later this tearful plea sped over the wire to Branton:

Company absolutely require money for railroad fares. Open your heart and give them something

BILL.

In reply came this response:

Give them my regards.

REECE.

As he read the bit of grim humor Bill laughed triumphantly. "I 've got him going. Now to make him take the count," he said. With a confident hand he penned the following knockout rejoinder:

All right, old man. Cancel engagement.

TRUETELL.

His firm belief in the potency of this ultimatum was begotten of cool, calm reasoning. He argued that inasmuch as it was only two days before the time set for the opening the manager at Branton had already incurred advertising expenses, that would be a dead loss to him if the company failed to appear; furthermore, that the sale of seats had started, and Reece could not afford to disappoint his patrons beforehand by calling the date off, however much they might be disappointed after witnessing the performance. Thus Bill drew the conclusion that the Connecticut magnate must advance the money to protect his own interests.

The accuracy of this logic was proved by the speedy arrival of the fifty dollars, accompanied, however, by a solemn statement from Reece to the effect that he made the loan under protest and would reimburse himself out of the first receipts the evening of the production.

No objection was entered by Bill to the stipulation. The money acted like balm to his tortured soul. For several days he had been confronted with the awful, paradoxical possibility of closing his show before he opened it. Now he was enabled to purchase the railroad tickets, and, besides, to settle a long-standing obligation which had been the subject of some heated discussion with his landlady.

The world appeared to him to be brighter than ever before; when the time came for the departure

of "The Gay Gothamites" for Branton, the manager of the blithesome organization turned his back on all his past misfortunes and entered upon his new sphere of activity with the courage of a Pizarro starting on his first conquest, though his pocket contained only one dollar and five cents by actual count!

CHAPTER II

THE LITTLE VAN BALKEN

ON the night of the first presentation of the "Merry Melange of Mirth and Melody" in Branton, Bill Truetell and Reece stood at the door of the "Op'ry" House waiting for the auditors to arrive. Their little telegraphic passage-at-arms was evidently forgotten. Figuratively speaking, the olive branch of peace waved above their heads, while between them stood a very material affair in the shape of a high, battered, old tin box, to be used as a receptacle for the hundreds of tickets that were expected to be bought that evening. The local amusement purveyor took the tickets. He deftly tore off the coupon from each bit of pasteboard as it was given to him, handed the coupon to its owner, and dropped the remainder in the old tin box. Since every stub Reece deposited represented an integral part of the company's share of the receipts, Bill maintained a close guard, lest Reece should be unmindful of the olive branch and neglect to drop the tickets where they belonged. Unfortunately, Bill's vigilant surveillance of his brother manager did not require any prolonged

effort, as the prospect of business that night was discouraging.

At seven-thirty o'clock, when the outer door opened, there was a rush of exactly three adults and one boy for admittance.

"I 'm afraid the church sociable 's going to hurt us, Bill," remarked the ticket taker.

"Hurt nothin'," retorted the director of the fortunes of "The Gay Gothamites." "If they want us, they 'll come, sociable or no sociable."

As time wore on it was apparent, even to Bill's sanguine vision, that the inhabitants of Branton did not want "The Gay Gothamites" very ardently, or, if they did, they were succeeding admirably in suppressing their desire. Only a few had trickled through the door by ten minutes of eight, and the performance was announced to commence at eight.

"They come pretty late in this town, don't they?" asked the travelling manager, in a vain hunt for consolation.

"Yes," replied the other. "They dine late, and linger over their wine."

Just then Bill felt the pressure of a hand on his arm, and turning, saw at the door a shabby-looking trio, consisting of a male and two females.

"Pardon me," said the man, in sepulchral tones, "but have I the honor of addressing the manager of 'The Gay Gothamites'?"

"If it is an honor, you have it," grunted Bill.

"Do you recognize the profession?" was the next question; without waiting for an answer, the visitor continued, "Allow me to introduce myself and family." He handed Truetell a soiled card, on which was printed:

THE THREE VAN BALKENS

WHIRLWIND DANCERS

"My wife and daughter, sir," went on the masculine Van Balken, waving toward his companions, whose demeanor was more suggestive of a dead calm than a whirlwind. "You have probably seen our turn?"

Bill replied in the negative, and gruffly asked how he could serve them.

"In two ways, sir. One is to extend us the courtesy of seats for your performance to-night, and the other — the other —" repeated the male whirlwind dancer, clutching the manager by the sleeve and whispering mysteriously in his ear, "is to help us get out of this town. We came with the last troupe that played here, two weeks ago, and business was so bad we stranded. We 've been up against it good and hard. The rest of

the company managed somehow to get to New York, but we 're here yet, and Heaven only knows when we 'll leave if you don't help us. You are a prosperous manager, Mr. Truetell, and — "

"Say, on the level," broke in Bill, "you 're guying me!"

The man with the sepulchral voice protested that his belief in the manager's capacity to aid them was genuine, but his appeal did not have the desired effect.

"You have no corner on troubles," said Bill. "Why, just before you came up to the door, I was figuring on how to get my own troupe away. If the audience don't come a little swifter, I can see my company settling down as permanent residents of this burg."

He was about to tell the Van Balkens not to expect any help from him, when his glance rested on the younger of the feminine whirlwind dancers. She was a picture of abject distress. Misery had a dwelling place on every feature of her pale face. Her eyes looked despondently at Bill. Her lips seemed set in prayerful supplication, and even her tiny snub nose appeared to join in the facial appeal, and found its way to Bill's sympathies.

Little wonder his manner changed! A young woman in need of help always touched a responsive chord in his heart. He had been known to sit for an hour by the side of a weeping chorus girl and soothe her, with all the solicitude of a father, and perhaps a little

more. If a warm clasp around the waist, or a gentle brushing of the hair from the temples, or a paternal salute on the lips was necessary for a sorrowing maid's comfort, Bill never withheld his assistance. Once his devotion to the cause of suffering femininity impelled him to hold an unhappy soubrette on his knee, and rest her head on his shoulder, and beg her not to worry over her "brute of a husband," who had contracted a habit of beating her whenever he drank to excess. Tall females, however, and females advanced in years, did not come within the purview of his unselfish fondness.

"A big woman does not need protection," was Bill's theory; "and old ones are altogether too grateful to suit my fancy."

Consistently with this line of reasoning, Bill's gaze swept rapidly by the altitudinous form of the elder Van Balken female and lingered on her little snub-nosed daughter.

"Come here, kid," he said.

The youthful whirlwind dancer approached Bill as gently as a zephyr.

When she stood before him, the manager of "The Gay Gothamites" smiled upon the shrinking figure so reassuringly that the radiance from his kindly countenance dried her eyes and made them sparkle with delight.

"Don't worry, my child," was the soothing advice

of this theatrical Samaritan. To assure her still further of his interest in her welfare, he held one of her hands, and rested his disengaged palm on her rounded shoulder.

"Oh, sir, you are so good!" lisped the girl.

The lisp found its way to Bill's heart over the same path the snub nose had recently travelled. They formed a combination too strong to be resisted.

"I 'll place you with this troupe," announced the manager, "but I don't know what I can do with ma and pop," he added, jerking his head over his shoulder toward the elder exponents of the whirlwind, who, having retired a few paces, pretended to be in complete ignorance of the caresses which Bill was generously bestowing on their progeny.

"Oh, sir, do take them along," pleaded the little Van Balken. "We can do our specialty. Ma can help with the wardrobe, and pa can double in brass."

"Does your pop take this for a minstrel troupe?" demanded Bill, glaring at the father, whose title to the right to double in brass had been acquired in a blackface organization, as a member of which he had played a cornet out on parade during the day and spun a tambourine in the capacity of end-man at night.

"Don't be cross with him," begged the daughter, with another lisp and another tilt of her snub nose.

Bill surrendered.

"My dear," said he, giving her hand a couple of

squeezes and her shoulder a couple of pats, "the old gent can come along, and ma, too."

"Oh, thank you, sir. When do we leave town?" queried the delighted little dancer.

Her inquiry drove home to Bill's mind the dire possibility that the size of his share of the night's receipts might not be large enough for railroad fares to the next stand.

"My child," he rejoined, with a strong effort to appear cheerful, "the question now is not '*when* will we leave town?' but '*do* we leave town?'"

The Van Balken girl laughed at what she considered a good joke. "I guess you 'll make the jump all right." Saying this, she glanced at the evidences of prosperity on Bill's person, among which were a somewhat shiny silk hat, perched rakishly on his large head, and an even more shiny imitation diamond glistening from the centre of his striped shirt front.

"I guess so, too," he replied. "Now, you and your folks go in and see the show, and to-morrow I 'll decide where to put you with the company."

"Take any seats you find vacant," he called out, as the trio moved toward the door in the lobby that opened into the auditorium. They experienced no trouble whatever in discovering unoccupied chairs. More difficulty would have attended a search for spectators.

"You could fire a Gatling gun in here without hit-

ting anybody," a lengthy usher remarked to an abbreviated boy who dispensed programmes and chewed gum with equal solemnity.

The little Van Balken heard the comment and glanced reproachfully at the speaker.

"Who are you staring at?" he demanded.

"If the gun shot through your head it would n't hit any brains," lisped the girl defiantly.

The programme boy's solemnity vanished at this rejoinder.

"Gee, what a soaker!" he cried tauntingly.

The girl did not pause to enjoy the usher's discomfiture. She quickly led her parents to three seats well down to the front, which they reached just as the curtain rang up on the first scene of "The Gay Gothamites."

CHAPTER III

MISS SNAPPER'S FOOT

THE performance started in with an abundance of quick action, pretty girls in enticing costumes, and knockabout comedians. It was by no means an immoral performance, nor did it possess any elements that could be safely transplanted to a Sunday-school entertainment.

The particular feature of the first scene was an athletic dance by the leading soubrette of the company, Miss Kitty Snapper, whose agility and plump figure were both displayed to good advantage.

Her turn was in progress when Bill and the local manager left their stations at the door and entered the auditorium to see how the show was going on.

"I want you to keep your eye on that girl's career," said Bill, enthusiastically, nodding toward the acrobatic Miss Snapper. "She 's a discovery of mine. I dug her up in Lebanon, Pennsylvania. Is n't she a dream?"

He would have rhapsodized at greater length if the "dream" at that moment had not experienced a sudden and painful awakening. In attempting a terpsichorean

evolution, which might be technically described as a cross between a flipflop and a cartwheel, Miss Snapper lost her balance and came down in a heap, supplementing her fall by a series of piercing shrieks, which were exceedingly trying to the nerves of the spectators in general and of Bill in particular.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "She 's killed herself!"

"Killed your grandmother," growled the local manager. "She 's twisted one of her pegs, that 's all."

As the unfortunate dancer showed no disposition to stop her screams, Bill rushed upon the stage and hastily ordered the curtain to be rung down. Stepping in front of it, he announced, in a quavering voice, that if there was a doctor present he would greatly oblige him by coming to the injured Miss Snapper's assistance.

In response to this request, a short, grim-visaged, steel-spectacled old man left his seat in the parquet and hastened, with jerky little steps, to the scene of the accident. Bill greeted him effusively.

"You 're just in time, doc," he said, seizing the old man's hand. "I know you can help the poor girl. Looks to me as if her ankle 's broken, or badly sprained, or something. Guess you 'll want her shoe taken off, won't you, doc? I 'll help, if necessary," volunteered Bill.

"Before — we — remove — the — shoe," returned the doctor slowly and icily, "I 'd — like — something."

"What 's that? A glass of water or a bandage?" suggested the manager.

"No, sir! My fee, sir!" replied the old man.

"What!" gasped the amazed showman. "Want your fee before you 've attended to the case?"

'You took my money before you let me into the theatre," was the calm reply. "Besides, I 've made up my mind not to trust you troupers any more. Whenever I do, I allus get the worst of it, and you don't look any honester than the rest."

"How much is your charge?" demanded Bill.

"A dollar and a quarter if it 's a sprain, and two dollars if it 's a fracture. Better let me have two dollars, and if there are no bones broken I 'll give you seventy-five cents back."

Bill looked at him witheringly. "I 've met some cold-blooded ones in my travels," said he, shaking his head, "but you 've left 'em all at the post."

"All right, sir," was the frigid rejoinder. "I leave you right here and now. I cal'late you 'd better send to the next town for a doctor." The grim-visaged man of medicine thereupon started to walk away.

"Hold on," cried Bill, realizing the seriousness of the old man's intimation that he was the only physician in Branton; "I 'll see what can be done."

"'WHAT! YOU WANT YOUR FEE BEFORE YOU'VE ATTENDED TO THE CASE?'"

The old man came back, and cynically watched the manager, as he made a quick search through his pockets. The effort resulted in revealing just ninety cents. This Bill proffered as advance payment on the fee.

"Two dollars or nothing," declared the obdurate little man.

"Great Heavens, doc!" the ruler of "The Gay Gothamites" pleaded, "You should n't be so cruel. Does n't that have any effect on you?" He motioned toward the afflicted dancer.

She was sitting on the stage, the centre of a sympathetic circle of her fellow-players. Her training as an acrobat enabled her to hold her disabled foot on her lap while she kicked up and down with the other, beating time to a succession of shrieks — which seemed to grow louder every second.

The doctor did not trouble to look in the direction of Miss Snapper.

"She could stop yelling if she wanted to." His pitiless remark reached the ears of the victim of the accident.

"You 're an old four-eyed liar!" she shouted.

"Be calm, my dear, be calm," said Bill soothingly; "and I 'll send for Reece to straighten this affair out."

The local manager came in obedience to the summons.

"Old man," confided Bill, after explaining the situation, "I need just a dollar and ten cents. Let me have it like a good fellow."

"But, Bill," replied Reece, hesitatingly, "you 're into me for fifty dollars already."

"It 's thoughtful of you to remind me of it just now," said Truetell, "and you 're protected all right, as far as that 's concerned, for you 're going to take it out of to-night's receipts."

"Yes," replied the local manager; "if there 's money enough in the house to cover the fifty."

"You mean to insinuate there may be less than fifty dollars here to-night?" quaked Bill.

"Dunno," rejoined Reece. "Suppose we find out before you go adding to your debt."

"You don't want me to count up the house before the doctor attends to that poor girl, do you?" protested the indignant travelling manager.

"It won't take long to count up," sarcastically retorted the local theatrical man. "I 'll send for the box, and we can do it right here, so as to save time."

Bill was compelled to assent. When the lengthy usher arrived with the battered receptacle for tickets, the local manager produced a key from his pocket, unlocked an old-fashioned padlock, and dumped the contents of the box on a rough table that had been dragged on the stage from the wings. The two managers seated themselves on opposite sides. Around

them crowded the members of "The Gay Gothamites." The little doctor, attracted either by the curious scene itself, or by his anxiety to know whether his fee would be forthcoming, approached as near the table as possible, and stood on tiptoe to look over the shoulders of the players intervening. The only individual in the vicinity who did not watch the count was the person most interested, Miss Snapper.

That unfortunate young lady sat on the stage, a little distance away, nursing her injured foot and giving an occasional scream to remind her associates that, though she could not view the operation that meant so much to her, she must not be forgotten.

As a preliminary to the count, Bill gathered up the pieces of pasteboard into small packs, handling them as if he was a card-player about to deal a hand of whist. Each little pack he held to his right ear, separating the edges slightly by means of his thumbs and forefingers. Then, with a rapid movement, he snapped the tickets, his acute sense of hearing and long practice enabling him to follow the count by the clicking sounds and to determine just how many were in each pack. The local manager repeated this interesting manipulation without detecting any error. In less than ten minutes all the tickets were counted. The footings represented the value of the audience at exactly fifty dollars and fifty cents. Of this the local manager was entitled to fifty dollars as reimburse-

ment for the money advanced, and fifteen cents, or thirty per cent of the remainder. Bill, whose contract gave him seventy per cent of the gross receipts after the fifty dollars was deducted, had thirty-five cents coming to him. This, added to the ninety cents he had fished out of his pockets, left him still seventy-five cents short of the fee demanded by the doctor.

When Bill finished his calculation, and realized its import, he gave vent to a sound that could be interpreted either as a gasp or an oath. Instinctively, he looked in the direction of Miss Snapper. His glance must have conveyed a telepathic message that the verdict had gone against her, for she immediately emitted a heart-rending shriek and rolled about on the stage, contortionist fashion, still holding her ankle.

Reece handed Truetell his thirty-five cents. "Sorry, old man," said he, and started to leave the stage, followed by the only physician in Branton.

The members of "The Gay Gothamites" sadly sidled away from the table, leaving Bill alone with the bits of pasteboard and his grief. Wofully he gazed at the tickets, and still more wofully at the rolling figure of the soubrette.

His distress did not continue long. It was interrupted by the rapid entrance on the stage of the programme boy, who had been stationed in charge of the admission door to the theatre while the count was in progress. He held four tickets in his hand.

"Mr. Kennedy and his family just came in," he cried, "and here 's their tickets."

Bill 's eyes gleamed as the boy dropped them on the table. At the rate of fifty cents apiece, they represented two dollars.

"Come back here!" he yelled after the disappearing doctor and Reece. They returned to the table. The actors and actresses once more crowded about, while Miss Snapper stopped her rolling and shrieking simultaneously.

"Cash these tickets, Reece!" commanded Bill, handing the four precious parallelograms to the local manager.

Reece promptly gave him a dollar and forty cents for his share.

"Now, you!" continued the travelling manager, turning to the doctor and offering him two dollars, "you start to work on that girl, and commence pretty quick, or there 'll be somebody else injured around here, and it won't be in the foot either!"

His attitude appeared so threatening as he rose from his seat that the little doctor grabbed the money without stopping to count it, and hastened to Miss Snapper's assistance. An examination of the injured member disclosed the fact that no bones were broken. This revelation entitled Bill to seventy-five cents rebate, which he forthwith claimed and received. A further diagnosis showed a serious sprain, and the

doctor gave it as his opinion that Miss Snapper could appear no more that night, and perhaps not for several nights afterward.

The little band of spectators in the auditorium, their patience completely exhausted by the long wait and an alleged musical selection by the squeaky orchestra, clapped their hands vigorously as the heavy curtain rumbled again to the top of the proscenium arch. The show was resumed, minus Miss Snapper, and performed to the finale without any further need of medical services.

CHAPTER IV

SOME SUCCESSFUL EXPEDIENTS

WHEN "The Gay Gothamites" had sung their last song and kicked their last kick for that evening, Bill and Reece stood in the lobby while the audience filed past. The local manager, feeling the importance of his position, puffed determinedly at a big cigar and nodded condescendingly to his fellow-townspeople. Truetell had no feeling, save one of extreme depression. Incidentally, he was trying to solve the problem of how to pay his troupe's hotel bills and railroad fares to the next town with a capital of a dollar and a half. Overcome by the weight of this serious cogitation, his eyes looked downward. As he lifted them he saw the Van Balken trio standing in front of him.

"How is she?" lisped the girl.

"Who?" asked the manager.

"The dancer who hurt herself," explained the sympathetic Van Balken.

"I sent her to the hotel in the transfer wagon an hour ago," said Bill. "The doctor says it will be several days, perhaps longer, before she can play again."

"Who 's her understudy?" questioned the whirlwind dancer.

"Nobody. Have n't had time to drill one. This is our first night out."

"Let me play the part," she entreated. "I'll stay awake to-night to get up in the lines, and I 'll be letter perfect by to-morrow morning. Don't say no."

"You 're all right, kid," was Bill's grateful response, "and I think I 'll take a chance with you. Go back on the stage now, and tell Lasker, the stage manager, to give you the part. Meet the company, with your ma and pop, at the ten o'clock train for Mighton to-morrow morning; and if I can induce the railroad to let us travel without paying, we 'll all get out of this God-forsaken town."

Again the little Van Balken laughed at the manager's poverty-pleading allusion. Her experience in the business had not yet taught her that silk hats, and striped shirt fronts with glistening stones in the centre, are not infallible indications of prosperity. She was still smiling as she departed, with her parents, in search of Lasker.

Bill turned to the local manager. "Old man," said he, "you acted pretty confounded mean to-night about the doctor's fee, but I always was a forgiving chap, and, to prove to you there is no hard feeling on my part, I 'll tell you what I 'll do. If they 've

got anything stronger than cider in this town, I 'll buy you a drink."

"Do you mean it?" asked Reece, mindful of the other's financial condition.

"I 'm a game sport, I am," was Bill 's courageous retort. "You lead the way."

Reece did not give him time to reconsider his rash invitation. He straightway escorted Truetell to a saloon around the corner, where they took positions at the end of a long bar, behind which a barrel-shaped bartender was dispensing drinks to a row of thirsty Brantonians. The latter were lined up against the bar like permanent fixtures. Every man had rested one of his elbows on the top of the counter in total disregard of the pools of beer which covered the surface.

"What 'll you have, gentlemen?" inquired the bartender, rolling his fat body toward the managers.

"Mine 's whiskey," said Reece.

Bill's bibulous fancy had a more elevated tendency. He called for a high-ball.

"A — what?" questioned the man behind the bar, squinting his eyebrows.

"Better take it straight," whispered Reece.

"All right. Gimme the same as my friend."

The bartender shoved a decanter and glasses in front of them.

After they had pledged each other's health, Bill became confidential.

"Now look here, Reece," said he, "I 'm going to ask you to do me a favor. This is n't a touch, so you need n't look alarmed. I want you to take me to the agent of the railroad, so I can make a proposition to him for the transportation of the troupe to our next stand."

"I won't have to take you to the depot," replied the other, "for he 's right in this saloon. There he is," continued Reece, pointing to a lanky man in a blue uniform, who, standing at the other end of the bar, was just raising a full-rigged schooner of beer to his lips. Bill sized him up, critically, noting that he wore the important expression generally a characteristic of underling railroad officials, and a cap on which the title, "Station Agent," was blazoned in gilt letters.

"Good!" ejaculated Bill, finishing his critical observation. "He looks like the right sort. Introduce me."

Reece called out, "Hi, there, Wheeler. Come over here."

The uniformed individual immediately obeyed the summons, without relinquishing his grip on the enormous beer glass. Holding it in his left hand, he extended his right to Truetell, when Reece had finished the ceremony of introduction.

"Delighted to meet you, Mr. Wheeler," said Bill warmly, "I almost felt as if I knew you, because

I 've heard the general passenger agent of your road speak of you so often."

"You don't mean it! Has Mr. Arthur really done that?" exclaimed the delighted Wheeler.

"Many times," replied Bill, who never in his life had met the general passenger agent. "I 've heard him say often it was only a question of time before he 'd have to give you a city of fifty thousand. He —"

"I say," broke in Wheeler. "Let 's drink up, and have another with me."

As he spoke, he lifted his glass of beer and blew off the foam. His delight at meeting an acquaintance of Mr. Arthur's must have caused him to add more strength to the blowing operation than was absolutely necessary, for the foam flew in all directions, a not inconsiderable quantity choosing for its target the bleary eye of the barrel-shaped bartender. That surprised personage received the whitish charge with an equanimity and fortitude worthy a nobler profession. Without uttering a word of protest, he lifted the corner of his apron, rubbed his optic twice, and said: "What 'll you take, gentlemen?"

Fresh drinks having been served, the station agent resumed: "I 'm mighty glad to know you, Mr. Truetell. If ever I can do anything for you, you 'll call on me, won't you?"

"Thank you," replied Bill, coldly, "I make it a rule never to accept any favors of railroads."

He accompanied this statement with such an air of injured innocence that Reece gazed at him, stupefied with astonishment, while Wheeler humbly pleaded forgiveness.

"I did n't mean anything by it, Mr. Truetell. You won't mention it to Mr. Arthur, will you?"

"Why, certainly not, old man," returned Bill, relenting, with a sudden warmth that completely reassured the railroad man. "And, just to show you," he continued, "I 'm not offended, I 'll ask a favor of you to-night."

"Will you?" said the grateful railroad official.

"It goes against my grain," the manager stated, "but I 'll do it in this case. What you can do," he went on, hurriedly, "is to arrange for the transportation of my company to Mighton. I expected a draft to-day for the tickets, but to-night I received a wire stating the money will not reach me before to-morrow evening. Now, we must leave here at ten in the morning to reach Mighton in time for rehearsals."

The station agent started to say something, which the voluble director of "The Gay Gothamites" cut short with: "I know what you 're going to say, old man. You 're going to ask me how this thing can be done. I 'll tell you. You and I and Reece will take a walk down to the depot now. When we reach it, you 'll fix up the tickets and give them to me. Then you 'll wire the agent at Mighton, telling him the

company will play in his town to-morrow night, and instruct him to call at the box office and collect the money for the fares. Before we start for the depot, though," Bill rattled on, "take a drink with me. Bartender, two whiskeys and a large glass of beer. Strange, so many of you railroad men prefer beer. That 's what Arthur always drinks. I 've never seen him touch anything stronger."

Here Wheeler ventured a remark. "You 've really been out and round with Mr. Arthur?" said he, glancing at the loquacious showman.

"Many a time," declared Bill. "He 's one of the boys, all right, after office hours. Next time you 're in New York I 'll arrange for you to meet him, and the three of us will make a night of it together."

The lanky station agent was only able to gasp his gratitude. Never, in his wildest imaginings, had he aspired to the luxury of a five minutes' chat with the general passenger agent. Now he was actually invited to revel in a night out with him! The anticipation of such a transcendent honor literally took his reasoning powers away. Placing both hands on the bar, he gazed blankly at his own image in the mirror opposite.

"You 're giving it to him a little too strong," whispered the local theatrical manager to Bill.

"Trust me for that," rejoined Truetell.

Wheeler, having partially recovered his mental

composure, stammered out: "Now, about this — transportation to Mighton — "

"All right," interrupted Bill, "we 'll walk to the depot now."

Thereupon, he took his companions by the arm, and led them to the sidewalk.

"Another peculiarity about Arthur," said the smooth travelling manager, as the trio headed for the station, "is this. Every now and then he takes a fancy to a chap in a small position and boosts him right up close to the top. Look at Rush, the assistant general passenger agent. Three years ago be ran the little depot at Wansea. He 'd have been there yet if I had n't staked him to a night with Arthur in New York. When I see Arthur again," confided Bill, giving Wheeler's arm a friendly squeeze, "I 'll bring up how decent you were to me in this little matter."

With this prevaricating peroration, Bill finished his plea for his company's railroad fares. "I can 't jolly him any more," he soliloquized. "It 's up to him."

The mind of the Branton station agent was in a quandary. He had not promised, as nearly as he could recollect, to be " decent " to Truetell to the extent the latter desired. His assurance in the early part of the interview of his readiness to do the manager a favor was not intended to go beyond the courtesy of a single ticket for Bill personally. To be called upon to fur-

nish transportation for a company of twenty-five, was a wholesale proposition that staggered him. He tried to weigh the conditions carefully. On one side of the scales was the risk he would run in issuing tickets and depending on the agent in the next town to collect their price. On the other side was Bill's friendship for Arthur. To what height in railroad preferment might it not lead him? The brain of the bewildered man grew dizzy at the prospect. He pulled his cap over his eyes, and coughed a couple of times.

"Mr. Truetell," blurted Wheeler, finally, "I 've never done such a thing in my life, but I 'm hanged if I don't take a chance this time."

Bill's palm slid down the railroad man's sleeve until it met his hand in a hearty clasp.

"You 'll never regret it, if you live to be a thousand," said the manager of "The Gay Gothamites."

By this time they had reached the station. Wheeler unlocked the door and ushered his two theatrical friends into a dingy little office containing a few worn-out pieces of furniture and a worn-out cat slumbering peacefully by the fire.

"Here, pussy, pussy," cried Wheeler.

The cat reluctantly arose, arched her back so high it appeared in danger of snapping in two, and walked leisurely to the station agent.

"Don't you think she 's a wonder, Mr. Truetell?" asked the proud possessor of the feline.

"A perfect beauty," replied Bill, who hated the sight of cats. "What is she, an Angora?"

"No; she's from Mighton. Been with me since I came here, twelve years ago," Wheeler explained. He sat down, took the pet on his lap and rubbed her head with his forefinger, a delicate mark of affection which the elderly pussy acknowledged by purring loudly. Bill began to grow nervous. Every time Wheeler rubbed the cat's head the tickets to Mighton appeared to be farther and farther away.

"I can sit here and do this by the hour," announced Wheeler, continuing to caress his pet, and extending the scope of the stroking operation from her head to her back. "It seems to please her so much."

"I 'll be hanged if it pleases me," was Bill's mental comment.

He looked at Wheeler imploringly, and bestowed a savage glance on pussy, his expression plainly indicating a strong desire to kick the animal out of the office.

Wheeler did not notice his anger, for just then he was oblivious to everything save the purring creature on his lap. He had forgotten Bill, the local manager, his own perplexity over the question of the tickets for "The Gay Gothamites," and his burning ambition to meet the general passenger agent and climb the ladder of railroad fame. Life to him at that moment represented nothing beyond his cat. The pendulum of his

existence swung in accord with his successive strokes up and down pussy's back.

"Will he ever come to?" thought Bill, anxiously.

As there seemed to be no prospect of an early change in Wheeler's abstracted condition, the distressed theatrical man resorted to strategy. Holding his cane behind him, he gently scratched the floor in imitation of the gnawing of a rat. The ruse had the desired effect. The cat leaped from her master's knee in the direction of the sound, while the station agent stared about like a person awakening from a trance.

"By Jove!" said he. "I 'd almost forgotten what we came down here for. Ah, now I remember. How many in the troupe, Mr. Truetell?"

"Twenty-four and a half," rejoined Bill, brightening up.

"Got a kid along?" inquired Reece.

"Yes, little Luke Burke. He 's an Irish pickaninny. He helps props, but we carry him mostly for luck," Bill replied.

While this discussion regarding the "half" was in progress, Wheeler opened his ticket rack and took out what was necessary for the transportation of the company to Mighton. Stamping the tickets, he handed them to the self-constituted friend of the general passenger agent, who accepted them with profuse declarations of the glowing tribute he should pay to Wheeler when he saw Arthur again.

"And now, gentlemen," concluded Bill, "we 'll adjourn to my hotel and take a nightcap."

"The Station Agent Stared About Like a Person Awakening from a Trance"

His good humor, resulting from his apparent success in preventing the troupe from becoming permanent

residents of Branton, evinced itself to such a degree that he actually stopped on his way out of the office to pat the cat's head, and say, "Good pussy."

The hotel was two blocks away. Bill's feelings continued at the enthusiastic pitch until the first block was passed. Then they dropped to the despondent point, as his mercurial disposition underwent a change. A dread forced itself upon him that even with the railroad tickets in his pocket, the troupe's departure from the town was not yet assured, for there were hotel bills to be paid, amounting to twenty-five dollars at the lowest calculation.

"It looks as if I 'm up against it a-plenty, and this town is the first crack out of the box," was Bill's gloomy mental summing-up of the situation.

The three men halted in front of a rickety yellow structure bearing the pretentious sign, "The Utopia."

"Come in, gentlemen," said Bill, making an heroic effort to appear cheerful as well as hospitable.

They entered the office. At the left of the entrance was the registry desk. Behind it the clerk sat, fast asleep, his chair tilted against the wall, his legs stretched across the desk, and his feet resting on the open register, as though to preclude a belated guest from signing his name without first arousing him.

Leading from the right of the office was a dining-room, the only occupants of which were two women

and a man, holding a convivial session at the centre table. The women, seeing Truetell through the open door, nodded, and beckoned to him to join their group.

"Who are the skirts, Bill?" whispered the local manager.

"A couple of my troupe," was the reply. "I wonder who the chump is with them?"

"Why, he's the landlord of this hotel," Reece answered.

"Serves him right," Bill muttered to himself. "I won't do a thing to him."

The two actresses continuing to beckon, Bill and his companions entered the dining-room. One of the ladies, a very tall person, arose, and in a very high voice said: "Be sociable, Mr. Truetell. Do sit down and join us, with your friends. This is Mr. Bennett. He owns the hotel, and he's keeping this room open after hours just for us. Isn't he a dear? He was over to the show to-night."

Bill, hoping to start the conversation ball rolling, inquired how he liked the performance.

"Great!" replied the landlord, laconically and sullenly. His hilarity seemed to vanish completely with the entrance of the three newcomers. He did not even turn his head to acknowledge the introduction. His attention appeared to be exclusively directed toward the tall actress. He was a small, stout person, with

bulging eyes, which glistened with admiration as he surveyed the statuesque proportions of the Gay Gothamite.

"How did you like the song by Miss Clayton?" persisted Bill, referring to the object of the landlord's affections.

"Great!" This time with an extra emphasis.

"Nice weather we 're having after the rain?"

"Great!"

In despair of changing the monosyllabic responses, Bill ordered drinks. When they arrived, the landlord took up his glass and clinked it against Miss Clayton's. Bill gave the toast, "Here 's looking at you," but the proprietor of the "Utopia," ignoring all drinking customs and traditions, did not look at him at all.

"I must butt in somehow," reflected Bill. Then he said, aloud: "When you have a little leisure, Mr. Bennett, I 'd like a few minutes' talk with you."

No reply from the infatuated landlord.

Bill repeated the suggestion.

Again there was no response.

In the meantime, the landlord's impersonation of the Sphinx and Bill's discomfiture were highly amusing to Reece, Wheeler, and Miss Clayton's actress companion, who formed a congenial trio at the other end of the table.

The ignored travelling manager, convinced that, unassisted, he could never reach the haven of the land-

lord's confidence, sent a signal for help to Miss Clayton, in the form of an expressive wink. That knowing artiste threw him a life-line, as follows:

"Mr. Truetell wants to chat with you," and she smiled graciously on her little captive. "I know you 'll do it to please me. You boys can go out to the office and have a talk, while we wait for you in here."

It was impossible to resist this appeal. The two "boys," neither of whom was a day younger than forty, walked out to the office desk, where the clerk still maintained his somnolent position. This apparent disregard of duty enraged the landlord, who lifted the feet of his sleeping employee from the registry book and swung them around so violently that the clerk slid from his seat to the floor. Thus rudely awakened, the hotel official, imagining a guest had just arrived, jumped up, banged a bell on the counter, and yelled, "Front!"

"I 'll front you if you go to sleep again!" threatened his employer.

He looked into the dining-room to notice the effect of his rigorous discipline on the tall actress.

A smile of approval was his reward.

"Let 's sit here," said the hotel proprietor to Bill, choosing seats that commanded a good view of Miss Clayton.

When they had seated themselves, Bill started immediately to make his plea.

"You see, it 's like this, old man. The house to-night was — er — was — er — slightly — small. You must have noticed it yourself, if you were there."

"Slightly," repeated the landlord, in a mocking tone that boded no good for the pleading manager.

"Well, decidedly small," conceded Bill, who had no desire to argue about the size of the audience. "It took all of my share for railroad fares, and I 've been figuring on what to do about your bill. You see, we leave at ten in the morning, and — "

"You leave if you settle. Otherwise not," the hotel man interposed.

Bill expostulated: "Oh, I say, old man, you would n't hold our trunks, would you? I can send you the money from Mighton."

"I 'll hold the troupe's trunks and the troupe also," snarled the landlord, "if there are any sheriffs hereabouts; and I guess I can locate one or two."

During this conversation, the eyes of the owner of the "Utopia" never for an instant turned toward the person with whom he was talking. Crouching low in his chair, he had lifted his right foot upon his left knee and elevated his right knee until it was on a level with his eyes. This knee he clasped firmly in both hands, and, having closed his left eye, he used the top of his knee as a sight over which he directed a fixed, unvarying gaze with his right eye at his inamorata in the dining-room beyond.

"You would n't sic the sheriff on us, would you?" Bill asked.

"In a minute," was the landlord's quick rejoinder. "Do you think I 'm running this place for my health, or for the benefit of a lot of fly-by-nights?"

Without attempting to hang an answer on either horn of this dilemma, Bill made a further suggestion:

"If you 'll come with us to Mighton to-morrow, I 'll give you an order on the box-office there, and you can get your money out of the first receipts coming to me. Besides, I 'll pay your railroad fare both ways."

"Me — travel — with — the — troupe!" The astonished landlord scowled, and spoke slowly, accompanying the five words with as many successive taps on his shirt bosom.

"Only as far as Mighton, and we 'll try to make the trip pleasant for you," insinuated the showman, jerking his thumb in the direction of the dining-room.

Having played his last card, Bill watched the landlord's face for the result.

It was soon apparent. The scowl that had knitted his brows almost over his eyes slowly disappeared. The hardened expression on his leathery countenance also vanished, a silly smile appearing in its place. For the first time that night, he turned and looked at Bill. Taking the manager's hand, he said: "All right, I 'm with you."

Bill returned the handshake with interest, and the

important transaction having been thus amicably settled, they walked back to the dining-room, arm in arm.

"Miss Clayton," Bill announced, gleefully, "I 've news for you. Mr. Bennett is coming with us to Mighton to-morrow. He has some law business to attend to over there, and he 's just promised me to take our train in the morning, and call to see us at the Opera House in the evening."

The tall actress glanced quizzically at her manager. His alleged reason for Bennett's trip to Mighton did not satisfy her discriminating mind. Experience had taught her that a hotel landlord travelling with a troupe indicated that the treasury of the company was not as sound as it ought to be, but, if the realization of such a condition in "The Gay Gothamites" caused her to question Truetell's monetary stability, she did not express her suspicion. With the tact of a born diplomat, she beamed on the landlord, and coquettishly asked, "Are you glad you 're coming?"

"Am I glad?" repeated the happy boniface. "Here you," calling a waiter, "bring us the best you 've got in the house to eat and drink. It 's my treat."

CHAPTER V

MINE HOST GOES ALONG

NEXT morning all the members of the company, with the exception of Miss Snapper, reported at the Branton station before the hour scheduled for departure. The injured dancer's foot caused her such agony during the night that she decided to return to New York for better treatment than the country doctor could give, and left by an early train. The immediate need of somebody to fill her place rendered the presence of the Van Balken girl most fortunate. Bill, first to arrive at the station, breathed more easily when the Whirlwind Trio appeared. Hastening to the daughter, he told her that Miss Snapper had gone away, and added, "Now, kid, it 's up to you."

The little Van Balken's brown eyes gleamed and her snub nose tilted with pride, as she exclaimed:

"Did n't I say I 'd be letter perfect this morning? Well, you can bet your last dime I am, and I 'll give them a performance to-night that 'll be the real genuine thing."

Her slangy confidence removed every doubt from Bill's mind.

He thanked her with a "Good girl," and patted her pale cheek, still further to evince his gratitude.

The last arrivals at the station were the very tall Miss Clayton and the very short Mr. Bennett. They came together. She stalked down the platform, the fascinated boniface puffing along beside her, carrying her large valise, and trying his best to make his fat little legs keep pace with her long stately stride. The late supper of the night before had not tended to put the lady in an amiable frame of mind this morning. As she walked majestically to the car, she hardly deigned to notice anybody, and least of all the little landlord, trotting, poodle-like, at her side.

Wheeler, the station agent, bustled about as actively as if he had received cash for the company's tickets. When the train arrived, he superintended the loading of the baggage and escorted Bill to the rear platform of the last car, where they took cordial leave of each other.

"Don't forget to mention that little matter to Mr. Arthur!" sang out the ambitious railroad man, as the train commenced to move.

"Never fear. Trust me to land you all right." Bill waved a good-bye to Wheeler, and joined his company in the day coach.

He was in excellent spirits, though the troubles of the tour were only beginning. His sense of happiness had its origin in his ultra-sanguine temperament, which

enabled him while on tour occasionally to overlook the discouraging conditions of the present and gaze far away into the future, where, he was confident, fat box-office receipts eventually awaited him. His mental vision was full of this glittering prospect as he entered the railroad car where "The Gay Gothamites" had spread themselves over twice as many seats as there were people in the organization.

If he had had eighty thousand dollars in his pocket, instead of eighty cents, Bill would not have walked down the aisle in a more contented frame of mind, and the pleasurable sensation was considerably increased by the snub-nosed soubrette, who smiled winningly as he came to the seats where the Whirlwind Trio had settled themselves. The smile encouraged the self-satisfied manager to stop and tell the girl a story, to which she listened eagerly. Bill himself laughed heartily at the finish, and the successor of Miss Snapper nearly went into hysterics to prove her appreciation of his ability as an entertainer.

When the conductor announced the name of the town of the troupe's destination, there was a general scramble for hand-baggage. The little Van Balken experiencing some difficulty in lifting her valise from the high rack above her seat, Bill hastened to her assistance.

Taking it down, he said, "Pretty big one, is n't it, for a small girl to carry?"

"Yes," was the lisping reply; "but pop has to handle his own and ma's. I 'm used to carrying it myself. Besides, I 'm strong for my size."

"How old are you, kid?"

"Nineteen, Mr. Truetell."

"Let me juggle the grip for you as far as the hotel," volunteered the manager.

"Oh, sir," she shyly made answer, "what would the company say?"

"Forget them," Bill commanded.

They headed the procession of troupers up the long hill from the depot. Marching behind their offspring and the solicitous manager were the elder Van Balkens. Next in line came Miss Clayton, with her enslaved landlord. The actress had not yet recovered from her indisposition. Her demeanor toward the world in general and her escort in particular was still frigid. The patient Bennett, having had no previous experience with the caprices of stage artistes, was at an absolute loss to reconcile her geniality of the night before with her contemptuous treatment of him in the morning. His lack of comprehension in this respect, however, did not manifest itself in words. He did not have the courage to ask to be enlightened on the subject, and, moreover, he was content to be near her, his memory carrying the recollection of her former good nature while his hand carried her bulky satchel.

Only once, as they climbed the hill on their way to

the hotel, she condescended to notice his presence by asking, "Is it heavy?"

"Not — a — bit," panted Bennett, mopping his brow.

"Never mind. The hotel 's only a mile off," was her reassuring comment.

The landlord paused a moment to shift the heavy valise from his right to his left hand. This movement resulted in a lowering of his left shoulder, and what appeared to be a sympathetic inclination of the left side of his face. As he puffed along in this position, he was able to maintain a continuous upward gaze at the haughty countenance of the tall actress, who allowed him to run the risk of a dislocation of the neck without a word of protest.

When Truetell's aggregation of Thespians arrived at the hotel they saw a long streamer of crape suspended from the front door-bell.

"That 's a good, healthy omen for to-night's business," remarked Bill, opening the door and leading the way to the desk in the office.

His company followed, ranging themselves around their manager in a semicircle, while he signed their names to the register. After affixing the last signature, he drew a curved line, inclosing all the names, and wrote in large letters on the outside of the line the title of the company. This he considered not only a catchy method of advertising, but also a desirable medium for impress-

"She Condescended to Notice his Presence by Asking, 'Is It Heavy?'"

ing the person behind the desk with the strength and personnel of the organization.

"Is the landlord in?" questioned Bill of the youth who had handed him the pen and dried the ink with an ugly-looking blue blotter as he finished his decoration of the register page.

"I am the landlord," was the proud declaration of the boyish individual.

"Why, certainly," apologized the manager. "It 's my mistake. I had in mind an old chap who ran the place years ago, when I played here with the 'Bon Bons.' But, I say, who 's dead? None of your folks, I hope?"

"It 's only my grand-uncle," said the young man. "We have the funeral services at the hotel this noon. I don't suppose your company 'll mind the preaching and singing?"

"Mind it?" Bill repeated. "Why, all of my people are singers. They 'll join in the service, if you want them."

The landlord, with a doubtful air, surveyed the line of Gay Gothamites standing in front of the desk. He tried hard to imagine them rendering an appropriate hymn, but he could not banish the fear that, in an unconscious moment, they might burst into a coon song.

"Much obliged," was the landlord's verdict, "but I guess the church quartette 'll do."

He proceeded to assign the members of the company to their rooms, demonstrating his versatility in hotel duties by personally conducting them to their

quarters, carrying their luggage, running the elevator, and answering divers calls for ice water and other beverages of a higher temperature.

He had returned to his desk from one of these errands, when the new soubrette rushed down the stairs to the office. Bill, who was opening the outer door on his way to the theatre, noticed an alarmed expression on her face, and paused.

Hurrying to the desk, the little Van Balken begged, "Oh, sir, can't you change my room?"

"Why, you 've one of the best in the house. What 's the matter?" asked the youthful landlord.

"I 'm right next to its room and I 've got cold chills being so close to it," explained the girl, with a shiver.

"What 's it?"

"Your grand-uncle."

The grand-nephew, taking umbrage at hearing his lately deceased relative thus neutrally alluded to, replied with a touch of asperity: "Too late to change you now. All the other rooms are taken."

Bill, who had overheard the conversation, walked to the desk.

"My room 's on the floor above," he suggested. "I 'll change with her."

"Are n't you afraid?" asked the little dancer.

"Not of dead ones. Live folks bother me more," Bill replied, philosophically.

CHAPTER VI

AN ADDITION TO THE COMPANY

THAT evening the attendance at the Mighton Opera House was as scant as the costumes worn by the female contingent of "The Gay Gothamites" in the Amazon march. The most appreciative spectator was Bennett, the Branton landlord. He escorted Miss Clayton to the theatre, and after seeing her through the rickety stage door, he went to the front of the house to collect his money from Truetell.

"I 'm very busy just now, old man," said Bill, who was engaged in the laborious duty of waiting for the audience to materialize. "Suppose you step inside and watch the show until I get a little leisure."

Summoning an usher, he gave his order: "Show the gentleman to a seat in the best private box in the house."

Bennett, beguiled by the prospect of a near view of his burlesque divinity, suffered himself to be led to a seat in the only private box the opera house could boast. There he comfortably bestowed his fat little figure, and did not change his position throughout the entire performance.

When the curtain descended for the last time, Bill went into the manager's office, sat down, extended his legs at full length, pushed his silk hat as far back on his head as it would stand without falling off, clasped his hands under his chin, and devoted himself to serious reflection on the situation confronting him. With his share of the meagre receipts he had settled for the railroad tickets from Branton to Mighton and had paid for the transportation from Mighton to Thone Bridge, which was the next stand,— fortunately only a few miles away. These disbursements left him less than two dollars with which to satisfy the claims of the Branton and Mighton landlords. He was puzzling his brain over this important monetary problem when Bennett entered.

"I 'm ready now," was the landlord's greeting to the despondent manager. "Let 's settle up, and I 'll take the first train back to Branton in the morning."

" Certainly," Bill replied. "Sit down, won't you, and — and — here, take a cigar," dislodging a long weed from the top pocket of his checked waistcoat and handing it to his creditor.

The landlord sat down, took the cigar, and, having eyed it suspiciously, gave an equally suspicious glance at Bill.

"How 'd you like the show to-night?" asked the manager.

"The show 's all right," Bennett answered, pet-

tishly, "but I 'd like to see my dough a great deal better."

"Your what?" inquired Bill, pleading innocence of the slang to gain time.

"You know very well what it is, though I don't think you ever saw much of it. My dust, my coin, my money." Bennett pounded his hand on the arm of his chair with each definition of the issue between them.

"Old man," said Bill, in a mollifying tone, "I understand what you mean. All I ask is for you to have a little patience."

"Perhaps you expect me to travel with the troupe all season?" was Bennett's sarcastic suggestion.

"There are worse companies than this," Bill declared.

The Branton boniface laughed jeeringly. "I 'd like to know what kind of nerve food you use!" he said. He took out his watch as he was speaking, and, noting the time, jumped to his feet.

"What 's the matter?" asked Bill.

"I 've got an engagement to lunch with Miss Clayton at the hotel," nervously responded the other.

"Don't let me keep you," said Bill, graciously.

"I 'm late already," was the landlord's rueful reply, again looking at his watch. "But before I go, straighten out my account, won't you?"

"Now, you see, old man —" began Bill.

Bennett impatiently broke in with, "Is it a long story?"

"I simply wanted to explain," Truetell stated, "that —"

"I don't want any explanations. I want my money," again interrupted Bennett. "And I must have it to-night. Now, look here," pointing his finger threateningly at his debtor, "I 'll give you just half an hour to produce. You meet me in the hotel then, and have the stuff with you, or there 'll be trouble." He went out, giving the door a slam to emphasize his declaration.

Bill leaped from his seat and made a dive across the room for the telephone. Hastily ringing the bell, he asked for the hotel. When his call was answered, he inquired if Miss Clayton had returned from the theatre.

"Just arrived," his informant announced. "She 's in the office now."

"Send her to the 'phone, quick," commanded the manager. The tall actress having placed the receiver to her ear, Bill requested her to induce Bennett to go with the company to the next stand. "It 'll oblige me greatly," Bill urged. "Does he go?"

"He goes," was her terse response.

Bill evinced his appreciation with such expressions as, "You 're a dandy!" and "Good girl!" A new idea came to him. "I say, Miss Clayton," he went on;

"can't you introduce your friend, Miss Parker, to that kid landlord up there? We may have to take him along too."

"I 'll do what I can," was Miss Clayton's encouraging rejoinder.

Bill thanked her warmly, and having hung the receiver on the hook, sat down to continue his attempt to solve his financial difficulty. The prospect did not appear so black now that Miss Clayton had proffered her expert assistance, but it was not yet bright enough to induce an appreciable amount of confidence. Suppose, thought Bill, her allurements were not sufficiently strong to carry the fat little landlord to the next stand! And, even admitting Miss Clayton's prowess as an enslaver of mine host Bennett, where was the certainty of a similar capture of the boy boniface of Mighton by her friend, Miss Parker! The possibility of a double success seemed to Bill so remote that he became a victim of the gloomiest forebodings. Only one light penetrated the darkness of his soul. It was caused by the recollection of the unquestioned hit scored that evening by the Van Balken girl. The little soubrette with the tilted nose and lisping voice had sung and danced and played her part in a manner that would have made Miss Snapper wild with jealousy if she had seen the performance. While watching her, Bill had forgotten his troubles, and now, as he recalled her success, his courage returned.

"If I ever finish this tour and get the troupe back to New York," he resolved, "I 'll star her next season."

Strengthened by this laudable resolution, he left the theatre and walked up the street in the direction of the hotel. On the way he passed a long, high wall, which his fervid imagination immediately covered with immense posters each bearing this legend·

ELSIE VAN BALKEN

UNDER THE PERSONAL DIRECTION

OF

WILLIAM TRUETELL

He even went into imaginative details, and wondered what colors would be most appropriate for the printing. Should the letters be white on a blue background, or red on purple, or a light shade of brown on a dark yellow? He had nearly decided in favor of the last combination when he reached the hotel.

The boyish landlord was not at his accustomed post behind the office desk, his place being filled by an individual just as youthful, who informed the inquiring manager that he was the "proprierator's brother,"

"'Beg Pardon,' Apologized the Manager. 'Guess I've Intruded'"

and that the "proprierator" himself was in a private supper room "with some of the show people."

This was cheering news to Bill. His heart was gladdened still further when he entered the room to which the clerk directed him. It was not a large apartment that was devoted to private supper purposes and it was not a large table around which the two landlords and the two actresses were seated. The absence of space was the reason, no doubt, why the quartette sat so close together. The owner of the "Utopia" of Branton was gazing lovingly into Miss Clayton's eyes, while the Mighton host, having apparently succumbed to the charms of Miss Parker, was paying similar attention to her lustrous orbs. Each gallant landlord held his lady by the hand. Each glared savagely at Bill, who, upon entering, had dispensed with the formality of knocking.

"Beg pardon," apologized the manager, looking up at the ceiling. "Guess I 've intruded."

"What the devil do you want?" growled Bennett.

"Did n't you say you 'd like to see me in half an hour?" meekly interrogated Truetell.

"See nothin'," Bennett snarled. "I 'm going with the troupe to Thone Bridge. You can settle there."

Bill readily acquiesced with, "Just as you say, old man." Recognizing the propitious nature of the situation, he turned to the other amorous hotel proprietor, and asked:

"Can I see you for a few moments?"

The youthful landlord dropped Miss Parker's hand, saying, in an annoyed tone; "What 's the matter? Anything important?"

"Not particularly important. Only your bill; that 's all. I thought if you had no objections, I 'd send the amount to you from Thone Bridge," explained the manager.

"You need n't do that, Mr. Truetell," chimed in Miss Parker, "because," she continued, smiling archly at her victim, "he 's going with us and —"

"But I have n't promised," interrupted the young landlord. "It 'll look pretty bad for me to go away just after burying my grand-uncle."

"Your grand-uncle won't care," sagely commented Miss Parker, "and your brother can run the hotel tomorrow. Come on. You need a little vacation."

The Mighton landlord hesitated, but did not hesitate long. Miss Parker's smile was irresistible. He did not openly declare his willingness to accompany the troupe to Thone Bridge, but his expression plainly showed that he would not be left behind, and when he took up the fair hand he had recently dropped, Bill decided a verbal assurance was unnecessary, and made a quick exit.

CHAPTER VII

THE SINGING LANDLORDS

INSTEAD of alleviating the misfortunes of "The Gay Gothamites," Thone Bridge increased the debit account of the company. Bad luck had set its seal on the "Merry Melange of Mirth and Melody." In the advance circulars it was boldly set forth that "people were turned away in large numbers at every performance." Thus far the turning away of patrons was observable after the performances were finished and in numbers remarkable only for paucity.

In Thone Bridge the landlord of the hotel where the troupe stopped, following the precedent established by mine hosts of Branton and Mighton, also joined the organization in the elusive hope of collecting his bill. Hostelry proprietors in Riverfall, Comerset, Sassonet, Wansea, Miverton, and other less noted one-night stands in that portion of New England were induced to do likewise. When three weeks of the season had passed the show was accompanied by no less than ten landlord creditors.

At this stage of the route the male members of the company, rendered desperate through not receiving

their salaries, organized a strike and deserted in a body at Warrener, Rhode Island. Bill, fully equal to the emergency, called a meeting of the boniface contingent on the stage of the theatre, and the hotel men, thinking that encouraging news in connection with their unpaid accounts was forthcoming, responded to the summons with celerity and unanimity.

"Boys," said Bill to them with his blandest smile, "Boys, my male chorus has quit me dead. What do you say if you go on in their places? The stage manager will teach you the business of the piece and you 've heard the songs often enough to know them by heart. What do you say, boys?"

This alluring chance to step immediately into a profession which has been the coveted goal toward which many an aspirant has struggled so long and wearily, did not excite any visible enthusiasm among the landlords.

On the contrary, they greeted the proposition with derision, and Pearson of Wansea, voicing the general opinion, cried out, "You 're the limit, Truetell."

"Limit nothing!" retorted Bill. "This is a strictly common-sense proposition. Let 's get down to cases. You can't be tourists with the troupe all season. I 'll admit the scenery in this part of the country is fine, but the business is damn bad, and I 'm not running a Cook's excursion for my health. It won't do you boys a bit of harm to do a little work.

"Perhaps," he continued persuasively, "some of

you 've got the real talent and can deliver the real goods. Think it over, boys. There 's twenty a week apiece for you in the job. If you don't accept I close the show, for we can't proceed without a male chorus. Think it over."

The landlords thought it over, and, retiring to a corner of the stage, they talked it over, jury fashion, for fully half an hour. Their verdict was at last favorable to the proposal. A variety of reasons governed the decision. Mine hosts of Branton and Mighton, being ruled largely by sentiment, saw in the new employment an opportunity for closer association with the Misses Clayton and Parker behind the footlights.

That indescribable power of fascination which the stage undoubtedly possesses, exerted its mysterious influence on some of the hotel men, who now began to feel the fires of histrionic ambition kindling in their breasts. The more recent additions to the list of travelling landlords, not being aware of the uniformly bad receipts and exhausted revenues, were affected to a considerable extent by the offer of twenty a week so generously made by Truetell. Finally, all still clung to the belief that sooner or later a change in the fortunes of the show would enable the manager to settle their hotel accounts. If he disbanded the company at Warrener, as he shrewdly threatened, though never intended, their bills would be forever unpaid. It was essential, therefore, to keep the organization intact, and thus the

landlords for their common weal voted to transform themselves into full-fledged Thespians.

Bill expressed his appreciation of their resolve as follows: "Thank you, boys. You won't regret this step in a million years. Report for rehearsal to-morrow morning at eleven, and don't be disturbed if Lasker is a little rough. It 's his way with beginners."

Punctually on the hour, the ten chorus recruits presented themselves before the stage manager, who, having ordered them to form in a single line facing the footlights, took his position immediately in front of them. They were in truth a singular exhibit. Thus far no lack of confidence was manifested. In place of stage fright an air of bravado was here and there observable. This was especially true of the amorous landlords from Branton and Mighton, both of whom assumed heroic attitudes for the edification of the fair objects of their devotion who were watching from the wings.

Pearson, of Wansea, six feet and four inches tall, made a brave effort to strike a position denoting utter unconcern. As a result, he struck several positions simultaneously. Commencing with his long, toeing-in feet, he displayed a series of grotesque angles culminating in an awkward junction of his bullet head and cartridge neck. The whole posture or combination of postures suggested the snapshot of a man while in the act of making a wild leap in several directions at once.

"They Were in Truth a Singular Exhibit"

Evans of Miverton, his thumbs in the arm holes of his straw-colored vest, pursed his lips, held his chin high in air, and squinted superciliously at the stage manager through a pair of brassy spectacles perched on the extreme end of his razor-edged New England nose.

Jones of Sassonet and Jennings of Comerset were disposed to treat the whole affair as a joke when they took their places side by side. Jones winked his right eye at Jennings, who reciprocated with his left. This inspired Jones, who was stationed at the head of the line, to add further drollery to the occasion by nudging Jennings in the ribs with his elbow. Jennings returned the nudge with emphasis; in an expanding spirit of playfulness, he pressed his other elbow against Evans, who stood at his left. Evans passed the nudge to Pearson and it was thus transmitted down the entire line.

All the landlords, successively moved by the gaiety of the situation, grinned first at each other and next at the stage manager, expecting that he too would join in their waggish humor.

Up to this time the stage manager had not uttered a sound. With hands deep in his trousers' pockets, hat pulled low on his forehead, and face wearing the proverbial sphinx-like impenetrability, Lasker gazed steadily at the grinning row in front of him and — cleared his throat. That was all. He spoke no word

and made no gesture of disapproval. He simply cleared his throat and the landlords ceased their grinning. He cleared his throat again, louder and more significantly than before. The chorus recruits looked sheepishly at each other and wondered why they felt so strangely uncomfortable. They were ten against one. The little man standing before them was not uttering admonitions, but they knew instinctively he was warning them with his freezing glance that the time for levity had passed, and they mutely acknowledged him as their master.

Having effectually tamed the frisky hotel men, Lasker, without moving from his position, proceeded to make a critical head-to-foot survey of them individually. At the outset of his examination, the stage manager's expression betokened mild curiosity. This was succeeded by grave dissatisfaction. As the investigation continued, a look of deep despair settled on his countenance, and when he finished his inspection of the last landlord, he threw up his hands, walked hastily to Truetell, who was standing near the "prompt" entrance, and gasped:

"Say, governor, is this on the level?"

"Straight goods," answered Bill.

"Those guys for the chorus?"

"Sure thing."

"And you ask me to teach them to act and sing?"

"You can teach anybody anything," was Bill's

flattering rejoinder. "You once told me you were the original seal trainer."

"Well, back to the seals for mine, if you insist on me tackling that bunch. I 'll resign right now."

Lasker pulled his hat still lower on his forehead, shoved his hands deeper in his trousers' pockets, and started for the stage door.

Bill followed in alarm.

"Hold on, old man," he expostulated. "Don't quit. Don't throw me down."

Lasker paused. His hand was on the latch of the door.

"Come back!" entreated the manager. "Try them once. They may not be as bad as they look."

"If they 're as bad as they look," solemnly declared the director of the stage, "there 'll be a riot in the house the first night they appear. Just look at them!"

The new members of the male chorus had not changed their attitudes since they became victims of the hypnotic spell cast over them by the stage manager. They stood transfixed, with mouths wide open, staring blankly straight ahead at the empty auditorium.

"There 's a nice collection of idiots to hand to an intelligent audience," said Lasker, waving his hand contemptuously in the direction of the lugubrious line of bonifaces.

"They certainly don't look very promising," Bill admitted.

"Promising! Why, training seals would be mere summer pastime compared with coaching those Rubes. I don't want to throw you down, Mr. Truetell," Lasker continued in a relenting tone. "I 'll make the attempt, but it 's the toughest proposition I ever went against, and I 've been thirty-five years in the show business."

He reluctantly resumed his position before the landlords, who viewed his return with that dumb, appealing expression noticeable in animals waiting for the butcher's knife.

"Perhaps I 'm too near for a proper effect," was his comment. "Stand just as you are while I go in front."

He climbed over the footlights to the orchestra and walked backwards until he was half-way up the centre aisle.

"It 's just as tough out here. Now attention!" he shouted, "and I 'll see what I can do. First and foremost I want you all to try to look like human beings."

The effort resulted in such a series of silly, sickly expressions that Lasker yelled out,

"You 're worse than before. Don't ever try to look human again. Now I want to hear your voices. You all know 'My Country, ' T is of Thee,' don't you ?"

Several of the landlords nodded a timid acquiescence.

"Sing it," commanded Lasker.

An unearthly babel of discordant noises immediately issued from the throats of the landlord chorus, and again Lasker raised his hands in despair.

"Stop! Stop!" he cried at the top of his voice. The order was drowned in the noisy din without producing any effect.

The stage manager rushed down the aisle toward the stage waving his arms frantically. The landlords assuming his gestures indicated that greater effort on their part was needed, roared all the louder, and persisted in their awful rendition of the glorious national anthem in various keys and divers tunes until they brought it to an inglorious finish.

Meanwhile Lasker had thrown himself despondently on an orchestra chair. Bill went to him with this suggestion, "Why don't you try them singly?"

"Singly or collectively, they 're the limit," said the ex-seal trainer, glaring at the landlords, who now, having regained their confidence, were standing in expectant attitudes waiting to be complimented on their singing.

Several minutes later, when the stage manager mustered courage for another attempt, he followed Bill's advice and commenced an individual examination, using the simple scale as the test.

The investigation showed that with a goodly stretch of the imagination, six of the voices might be classified as tenors. The remainder would admit of no classification whatever. Their owners, who gave vent to weird sounds suggestive of the creaking of unoiled machinery, were peremptorily ordered by Lasker to

make facial motions imitative of singing while performances were in progress but under no circumstances to yield to a temptation to join in the vocal part of the entertainment.

When the rehearsal was over Lasker said to Bill:

"I may manage to pull them through somehow without police interference. We 're badly handicapped, though, with six tenors, bad ones at that, and not a bass voice in the show."

"Don't worry," replied the inventive Truetell, who straightway called a messenger boy and sent the following remarkable telegram to his advance agent:

Hereafter book company in hotels where landlords sing bass. We have tenors to burn.

TRUETELL.

CHAPTER VIII

DEBUT OF THE NEW MALE CHORUS

THE first professional appearance of the metamorphosed landlords occurred in Roscoe, a small town in the northern part of Massachusetts, bordering on the New Hampshire line. No announcement of their intended debut had appeared in the local semi-weekly newspaper. Ordinarily Bill's advertising policy was to give as wide publicity as possible to anything out of the common that happened in connection with his attraction. The appearance of ten genuine hotel keepers as a singing and dancing chorus was a novelty that probably never before had been presented in the history of the show business. Bill's instinct as a showman taught him that the publication in advance of the news of this important happening was calculated, by its very nature, to stimulate public curiosity, and increase the Roscoe box-office receipts. He gave the matter much consideration, and

to assist his mind in forming a judgment, he drew up the following advertisement:

Lucky Roscoe!

Selected for the Premier of the Season's Great Event.

Real Landlords in the Chorus

OF

"The Gay Gothamites."

10—BONA FIDE BONIFACES—10

COUNT THEM!

They Left Their Happy Hotels to Go upon the Stage.

Secure Seats Early. **No Advance in Regular Prices.**

The seductiveness of this announcement was not lost even upon the modest mind of its author. He

smiled with satisfaction when he had written the last word and read the copy through twice. With each reading his smile broadened.

"I 'll run the advertisement," was his first decision. "It 'll be sure to pack the house, and I need the money."

To make assurance trebly sure, he commenced a third examination of the proclamation and read the first line.

"LUCKY ROSCOE!"

Here he halted. Doubt tinctured his enthusiasm. Was Roscoe really lucky, in the circumstances? Would the Roscoeites consider themselves especially favored by fortune while observing the debut of the landlord aggregation? Bill remembered the warning of Lasker, who at the first rehearsal predicted a riot when they made their public appearance. Subsequent rehearsals had not developed any latent histrionic or operatic talent. If the spectators at Roscoe evinced any anger at the raw quality of the male chorus material, would not their rage be increased by the recollection of the flamboyant advertisement?

At this stage of his reflection the doubt merged into fear, and Bill tore the announcement into little bits, saying meanwhile to himself:

"If I can only get by with them I ought to be satisfied."

His final decision was also affected by the recollection of Joe Stewart, the local manager at Roscoe,

who enjoyed a reputation for pessimism unsurpassed on the Massachusetts circuit. Stewart had been known to ring down his curtain on shows which he considered below the Roscoe standard.

"What will he do when he sees this string to-night?" Bill asked himself the morning before the Roscoe performance. In the afternoon his worry on the subject perceptibly increased. At the theatre in the evening, as the momentous time for the appearance of the landlords approached, his extreme nervousness led him to shut himself in the manager's office, which was connected with the rear of the auditorium, and listen apprehensively at the keyhole. He actually lacked the courage to be a witness of the entrance of the landlords and the riot in the audience which, he was now convinced, was sure to follow.

Bill looked at his big open-face silver watch.

"They 're due. They must be on," he muttered in agitation, pressing his ear closer to the keyhole. There was a death-like silence, followed by shrieks from the audience.

"It 's all off," quaked Bill. "I felt it in my bones. Stewart 'll close us up sure."

Soon afterward, the local manager, laughing boisterously, entered the office and slapped its gloomy occupant on the back.

"You 're a wonder, Truetell!" he cried. "Where

did you get the male chorus? They 're the funniest lot I ever saw. Every man is a born comedian."

"'THEY MUST BE ON,' HE MUTTERED IN AGITATION, PRESSING HIS EAR CLOSER TO THE KEYHOLE"

"Thank you," replied Bill, astounded. "Do you — do you think the audience likes them?"

"Likes them? They 're having fits in front.

You 've only got to look at that bunch to contract a spasm."

"What did you think of their voices?"

"Did n't pay the slightest attention to them," replied Stewart. "Nobody expects real singing in a musical comedy. But you 've got a fortune in that male chorus."

Bill thought of the various hotel accounts they represented and said, "Do you think so?"

"Sure thing. They are without doubt the most natural set of comics I 've ever seen. Don't lose them, Truetell."

"It won't be my fault if they get away," said the relieved travelling manager.

CHAPTER IX

THE MECCA OF VERMONT

THE instantaneous hit inadvertently scored by the new male chorus that evening induced a happy frame of mind in both the travelling manager and Roscoe's impressario when they sat down to count up the house, but with the performance of the task their happiness faded away. Stewart unlocked the tin ticket receptacle, and Bill obligingly turned it bottom side up to dump its contents on the table. When he lifted it, a miniature stack of tickets, scarcely a handful, was pathetically disclosed between the two men. Bill pounded and shook the box. One solitary piece of pasteboard fluttered from the interior and joined the pitiful little pile on the table.

Stewart, noting the air of extreme disappointment settling on Bill's face said, "Guess you 've been having some pretty hard knocks lately."

"I am the original chopping-block," was the mournful reply.

Never at any stage of his unsuccessful career was fate more cruel to him than at the present. The tide of box-office receipts had persisted at such an extreme-

ly low ebb that the danger of stranding was never absent, and the unvarying bad business caused an unceasing shower of troubles to fall on Bill's unfortunate head. Hotel bills he was able to manipulate in many instances through his cleverness in persuading landlords to link their fortunes with the troupe, but other creditors were not susceptible to this influence. Reminders on account of debts to printers, scene-painters, costume-makers, and other obligations harassed him from all directions. The reminders were succeeded by peremptory demands, and these, in turn, were followed by legal processes. Sheriffs began to camp on the trail of the show.

After Roscoe the route led "The Gay Gothamites" into New Hampshire, where the welcome extended the hardy band of stage adventurers was no warmer than in her sister States of New England. On entering the New Hampshire field, however, Bill succeeded in completing an arrangement which once more aroused hope in his desponding heart.

He obtained a guarantee for a booking in Farry, Vermont. A lodge of Elks having secured the date for a benefit, its members sold tickets enough at advanced prices to fill the house, and offered Bill through the local manager of Farry four hundred dollars for his share, to be paid the evening of the performance. There was no hesitation on Bill's part nor haggling over the size of the guarantee. His telegraphed reply

contained only one word, "Accepted." Having sent the message he experienced a sense of the keenest exhilaration. Four hundred dollars, in real money, and Farry only two weeks distant! At last the tide had turned and Fate was smiling on him. What would he do with this windfall? He made a rapid mental disposition of the amount and unselfishly parcelled it out among his creditors, commencing with the members of his company, and retaining not a dollar for himself.

During the next week the organization struggled along, barely managing to move from one place to another. The situation was fast becoming critical. On all sides Bill was importuned for money. When actors clamored for salaries long overdue, he invoked the magic name of Farry and calmed their anxiety. He would show his appreciation of their loyalty substantially when they reached Farry. The pressing demands of other creditors he met in a similar manner.

The seven days preceding Farry comprised Holy Week, admittedly the worst period from a business point of view in the whole theatrical calendar. It is the general custom of companies to lay off during Holy Week, but, hard as the progress promised to be, Bill could not stop. If he did not continue moving all was lost. To halt the company for more than a day would be to lose all the vitality necessary to keep

it in motion, and Farry with its golden guarantee would never be reached.

Holy Week started with a box-office showing so minute as to be almost indistinguishable. As the battered bark of "The Gay Gothamites" floundered through the stormy waters the pilot began to lose courage, but he took heart again as he saw the bright beacon-light of Farry shining clearly across the troubled sea.

"We must reach Farry. We must, we must," he repeated to himself, each time with renewed energy.

To gain this Vermont Mecca he brought into play all his powers of manipulation and scheming in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles, but the prospect was discouraging.

While reaching out for every possible resource, he sent a message to the local manager at Farry, begging him to advance part of the guarantee. In response came the following:

Not a cent till after the second act. If you can't play the benefit I 'll get a show that can.

COLSTON.

"He means it, too," Bill was forced to admit, tearing the yellow paper into bits.

No less than four landlords, all bassos, joined "The Gay Gothamites" during Holy Week, being induced to go along with the promise of paid-up bills in Farry.

THE MECCA OF VERMONT

After five days of heroic endeavor Bill landed his company on Saturday in Hortonville, Vermont, the town immediately preceding Farry, booked for the following Monday. With the end of the continuous strain almost within sight, everybody in the organization revived in spirits. The long-awaited salaries would be paid on Monday! This blissful prospect acted as a tonic to the long-suffering players, and the snappiest performance of the season was given in Hortonville.

Bill, in the front of the house, was in a gleeful mood. He recounted his experiences to the Hortonville manager, and received from him hearty congratulations on his success in warding off the disasters that had threatened him.

The two theatrical men continued their pleasant discourse at a neighboring bar until half an hour after the performance, when Bill excused himself with, "I must see that the transfer people take my stuff out all right."

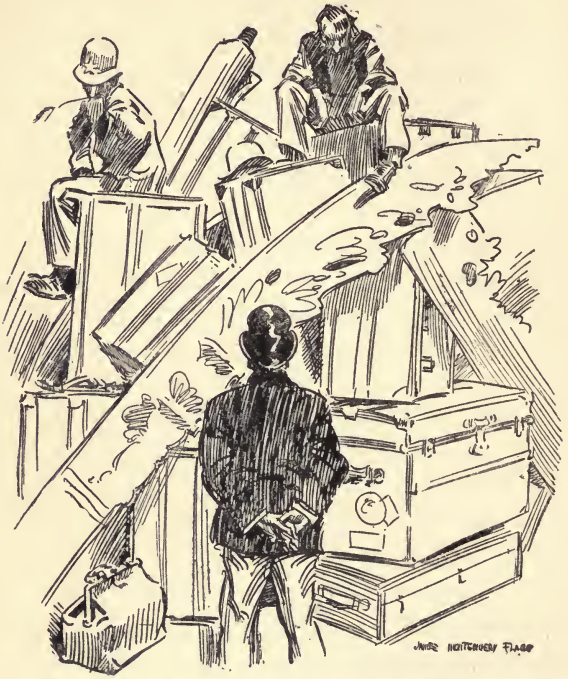
Arriving at the end of the dark alley that led to the stage door, Bill saw an empty transfer wagon backed up to the entrance.

"Hi, there," Bill shouted to the stage hands, "why don't you get my stuff out?"

Somebody yelled in reply, "Your stuff is pinched."

Bill took a couple of flying leaps up the steps and through the doorway. In the centre of the stage he

beheld his scenery and baggage stacked in the shape of a mound, on the top of which two men were contentedly seated.



"His Baggage and Scenery Stacked in the Shape of a Mound"

"What are you doing on my stuff?" Bill cried in anger.

"Be you the owner?" asked one of them, as both

took out of their pockets ominous-looking documents and handed them to Truetell.

"Sheriffs, eh?" grunted Bill.

"That 's what," the official spokesman admitted.

"And what do you propose to do?" demanded the manager.

"We propose to 'tach this yere property."

Both sheriffs, apparently acting under the belief that in order to attach goods legally they must attach themselves to them physically, arose from their sitting positions and sat down again so hard that the scenery cracked under them.

Bill examined the writs. They were for balances due a scenic artist and a costumer, amounting to a hundred and forty dollars.

"Come down here and we 'll talk this thing over," suggested Bill.

The officials, fearing lest their attachments would be dissolved by a relinquishment of physical contact, replied in unison, "Not by a derned sight."

"Very well, I 'll join you up there."

Bill climbed to the top of the pile, sat between the rural officers of the law, and commenced with all his persuasiveness to take them out of their official shells and into his confidence. He eloquently rehearsed his troubles of the past week, showed his contract for the engagement in Farry, explained the guarantee awaiting him there, pointed out the necessity of scenery to give

the show, and finally promised to pay the sheriffs in Farry as soon as the money was handed him.

After much argument Bill's earnestness prevailed. The sheriffs agreed to the moving of the production to Farry, but insisted that they must stick to it as closely as possible on the journey and in the Farry theatre until the settlement was effected.

Half an hour afterward, the transfer wagon, loaded high with the belongings of "The Gay Gothamites," and carrying the two sheriffs perched on the top of the paraphernalia, rattled its way down the dark alley and up the main street to the Hortonville station. A late freight train bore the outfit to Farry.

"There goes the last of my troubles," said Bill with a long sigh of relief, as he heard the whistle of the departing train just before he went to bed. He had money enough out of his share of the receipts that evening to pay for the hotel accommodations in Hortonville and his railroad tickets. Nothing now stood between him and the well-earned reward that awaited him in Farry.

"The tougher the fight the greater the satisfaction in winning," thought Bill, and his sleep that night was as peaceful as a babe's.

The company and its manager left for Farry the next afternoon, arriving at early twilight. With youthful elasticity Bill jumped to the station platform. An ancient yellow omnibus with a pair of sleeping, drab-

colored horses were waiting for passengers. Bill generously insisted on all of the company taking a ride to the hotel at his expense, gallantly helping the ladies to seats — and incidentally squeezing the hand of the little Van Balken and receiving a reciprocal pressure as he assisted her up the shaky steps. When the vehicle would admit of no more occupants the manager obligingly took a seat beside the driver, a taciturn old rustic, who, by applying a vigorous whip to his horses, induced them to forego their quiet Sunday afternoon nap and drag the clumsy conveyance away from the station.

Bill made no attempt to enter into conversation with the driver when the journey to the hotel started. His own happy thoughts occupied his exclusive attention and gladness filled his soul.

At last he was in Farry! Here a new lease of activity would be extended to him. Farry would be the oasis in his life's desert, refreshing him for further struggles. He would always remember Farry — and what a beautiful memory it would be! Bill gazed admiringly at the gentle slopes of the hills, the smiling green fields, and the trees with their glorious autumnal tints. He filled his lungs with the cool air laden with scent of the pines, and the whole effect was so exhilarating he could maintain silence no longer.

"Ah, my man," said Bill, turning to the driver, "this is the real joy of life! To be free from all cares and live next to nature, close to God's soil!"

To these exuberant remarks no response was vouchsafed by the Farryite.

The early twilight deepened. In the west a bright glow overspread the sky, inspiring Bill to further rhapsody.

"Ah! That radiant sunset!" he exclaimed. "That wonderful —"

"Ye 'r' mistaken about the sunset, mister," broke in the driver. "That there light 's the op'ry house burnin' down. Been on fire nigh onto two hours."

CHAPTER X

A "LEGITIMATE" STAR

ON the Wednesday morning following, Bill stood once more before the discolored mirror in his hall-bedroom in New York. His hands trembled as he adjusted the familiar necktie, and his lower lip quivered with nervous tremor. There was a new furrow on his forehead, an indelible record of "The Gay Gothamites'" tribulations, which had culminated in the entire destruction of the production at Farry, not to mention the loss of the guarantee for which Bill had fought so long and desperately.

Though the catastrophe sounded the death-knell to the enterprise, it had failed to destroy Bill's courage. While the ruins of the "Op'ry" House were still smoking on that memorable Sunday evening he set energetically to work organizing a benefit to be held in the Town Hall the next night. The Farryites made a generous response, and the proceeds were sufficient to purchase railroad tickets to New York for the entire organization except the landlords, who were permitted to return to their respective hostelries at their own expense, richer through their alliance with the company in stage experience, if not in money.

Bill maintained a semblance of nerve until after he had bidden good-bye to his followers on the Tuesday night their train arrived at the Grand Central station in the metropolis. Then he hurried to his lodging-house in a state of mental depression which he felt could only be relieved by sleep — and sleep had not visited him for forty-eight hours. But his troubles did not end with slumber, for he straightway fell to dreaming. He was on a raft on a stormy sea with the little Van Balken. Surrounding them in the black water were swarms of hideous things having the faces of men with the bodies of sharks, and wearing huge fiery sheriffs' badges on their scaly breasts. They were struggling to get aboard, led by two monsters in whose countenances Bill recognized the pair of Hortonville sheriffs who, he remembered, had vindictively believed to the last that the fire in Farry was started by his orders to deprive them of their attachable property. Bill's left arm encircled the waist of the girl, while with his disengaged hand he beat the demons of the deep back into the sea as they returned again and again to the attack. The terrible conflict lasted all night.

Bill awoke in a shattered condition mentally and physically. While he was dressing, even the ordinary street noises startled him. A door-bell tinkled faintly three flights below. It jangled loudly on his overwrought nerves, and he shuddered convulsively, fearing

lest one of his innumerable creditors was hot on his track. He did not pause long before his mirror in the arrangement of his necktie. The careworn face reflected there, with its hunted expression and dark-rimmed, bloodshot eyes, increased his alarm; his fevered imagination conjured up a myriad of terrors. He sat down, pressed his hands to his burning temples, and tried to think connectedly. What was he to do? If he remained in the house his pursuers would be sure to find him. If he went out in the daylight he could not escape their notice. What was he to do?

"It 's Bloomingdale for mine, if I don't get out of this room," was his final conclusion.

Leaving the house, he walked rapidly to the nearest elevated station and boarded a down-town train. He alighted at the Battery, crossed the park, and took a seat on the extreme south side facing the harbor.

"They 'll never look for me here."

This consoling conclusion was soon followed by a welcome sensation of relief. A cool breeze from the bay swept the fever from his brain. He drank deeply of the stimulating sea air. Again the blood tingled in his veins and ambition tugged at his heart-strings. Facing him, the Statue of Liberty, outlined fearlessly against the blue morning sky, inspired Bill with new hope.

"I may be a dead one," he soliloquized, "but they have n't buried me yet."

With returning self-confidence he commenced the erection of an air-castle — which his lively imagination rapidly completed. It was of wondrous architecture, fronted with stately columns of purest Grecian marble, on each of which a "Standing Room Only" sign was suspended. While the crowds thronged to gain admittance, William Truetell, the owner, hand in hand with the little Van Balken, watched the inspiring sight. Apparently the palatial edifice was built to withstand the shocks and storms of ages, but it crumbled to dust the instant Bill felt a hand on his shoulder.

The castle-builder on his bench in Battery Park started in alarm, but did not look around. Convinced that an officer had at last come to arrest him he made a weak attempt to be game and stammered, "All right. I 'm ready."

"Ready for what, Truetell?" a deep voice asked.

"Why it 's Rupert Steelson!" cried Bill, rising and greeting him with a hearty hand-shake; "and I thought you were a policeman!"

"Do I look like a policeman?" the possessor of the deep voice queried with mock seriousness.

Mr. Steelson was of medium height and middle age. His face was smooth, sallow, and classically featured. He wore a tall, shabby silk hat and a long, shabby ulster, the collar and cuffs of which were

trimmed with a furry material that had been intended primarily to adorn the garment, but had long ceased to carry out its end of the contract. A glossy black wig extended to his shoulders in a succession of waves. There could be no mistake in guessing his profession: "one-night stands" was written over his personality from head to toe.

"And how fares it with thee, my friend?" the actor asked, when the two men had seated themselves.

"I don't want to worry you with my troubles, Mr. Steelson," commenced Bill, apologetically. "You have had your share of them since you began starring in the legitimate and — "

"Ah, my friend!" said the actor, raising his hand with a graceful stage gesture denoting martyr-like submission. "We are born to troubles, and they will continue with us until 'our little lives are rounded in a sleep.' Take cheer and drive away dull melancholy. It becomes thee not. Tell me your latest grievance 'gainst Dame Fortune."

"You 're all right, Mr. Steelson," was Bill's grateful comment, and he rehearsed the rise and fall of "The Gay Gothamites" to a sympathetic listener.

When the narrative was concluded the star shook his head slowly and said, "Do you know what is the matter with thee, friend Truetell?"

Bill expressed a firm conviction that many things were the matter.

"Only one," declared the actor, decisively. "Only one. You are in the wrong theatrical atmosphere. Musical comedy, pah! Come with me, Truetell. I need a manager. Together we will emblazon our names on the immortal pages of Shakespeare. As a distinguished star once said to me, 'Let me lead you up the dark, steeping path to glory. There are none that can follow thee.'"

Bill started to observe that up to the present time the sheriffs had experienced no difficulty in dogging his footsteps; but Mr. Steelson's grave manner restrained him, and he said instead,

"I 'm afraid it would n't do. Shakespeare and me don't trot in the same class."

"Nonsense!" rejoined the star. "Shakespeare is as broad as humanity. No man is too small, no man too large, for him. He can lift the lowliest mortal to his level. Truetell," he continued. "I 've watched you. You have the real artistic temperament. You — "

The manager interrupted him. "Please don't, Mr. Steelson. My nerves are not quite right this morning."

Mr. Steelson protested his sincerity. Fate, he contended, had brought them together, and there were a thousand reasons why they should join forces.

"You 'll excuse me if I mention something before we go any further," said Bill. "Where is the backing

"Come with me, Truetell. I Need a Manager"

for this show coming from? I've got thirty-five cents in the world. Have you any money, Mr. Steelson?"

Contracting his brows as though the subject was far beneath his dignity, the star mechanically inserted his fingers in the pocket of his waistcoat, and drew forth a few small coins which he spread on his palm.

"Just forty-five cents," he announced. "But what matters it? What care we for backing while we have our health and strength and the public is with us?"

No doubt arose in Bill's mind on the subject of physical vigor, but the tendency of the public toward the proposed attraction was an issue that could only be judged by the public's inclination — or, rather, a lack of it — toward the star in the past.

Observing his friend's hesitation, Mr. Steelson resumed his hopeful prognostications. "I feel," he declared, "that my time has arrived. I have never failed to delight my audiences — when they came. My one solitary difficulty has been to get them inside the theatre. Once inside, they are mine. To get them in I require booming, and you, Truetell, are just the man to do it. Management is half the battle in this business. Be my manager, both for our sakes and for posterity's."

The star laid one hand on Bill's shoulder and extended the other toward the Statue of Liberty as

if to invoke its benediction on their union. But the solemnity of the appeal did not distract the manager from the practical side of the case.

"I am not worrying about posterity," he said. "What does worry me is this: How are we going to organize a legitimate show on a joint capital of eighty cents?"

"If I could answer that question," said the star, "I should not need a manager. Any man can manipulate an attraction with plenty of money. In this situation we must rely on brains, your brains, Truetell."

After a few minutes' serious deliberation Bill decided in favor of the star's proposal. He reasoned philosophically that a new business environment would divert his mind from his recent calamity, and that, whatever bad luck was in store for him as manager of the Rupert Steelson company, he could not possibly be in a worse plight than at present.

His decision was applauded by the actor.

"Now what about terms?" asked Bill.

"Terms?" echoed Mr. Steelson.

"Yes, how are we to share the profits?"

"Profits?" The amazed tone of the star's voice in repeating the word indicated its long absence from his vocabulary. "Ah yes, profits. What do you suggest, Truetell?"

"I suggest an even split of profits and fifty dollars a week to each of us for expenses — if the money comes in."

"Agreed," said the star; "if the money comes in."

The two men shook hands and left Battery Park arm-in-arm, bound for the Rialto.

CHAPTER XI

A GIRL BECOMES SACRED

BOOKING of the Steelson tour, organizing the Steelson company, and rehearsing the Steelson repertoire, occupied four weeks. The list of plays included "Hamlet," "King Lear," "Richard III," "Othello," and "She Stoops to Conquer," familiarly called by the actors by the abbreviated title of "She Stoops."

In connection with this last play the star instructed the manager to insert the following in all the advertisements:

> Rupert Steelson's Own Version
>
> OF
>
> SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER
>
> BY
>
> OLIVER GOLDSMITH

The type in his name he insisted must always be at least double the size of Goldsmith's, who could only

lay claim to the doubtful credit of being the original author.

"You see," he explained, "I had to put in a new last act and bring the whole thing up to date. It would never do for a minute as Goldsmith wrote it."

Bill gazed in wonder at the modern stage genius.

"How about the Shakespearian plays?" he asked. "Did they require any altering?"

"Ah!" exclaimed the star. "Now we are treading on holy ground. Shakespeare must be inviolate. I should be a vandal indeed if I disturbed a line or even a word."

"A vandal is a kind of play-pirate, I suppose," said Bill.

"Yea, very like," rejoined Mr. Steelson.

For the transaction of business appertaining to the tour, desk room was engaged on the top floor of a theatrical office building on Broadway, the only location in the city where payment of rent was not demanded in advance. Had it been exacted the luxury of an office would have been dispensed with, for as yet there was no money either in the treasury of the concern or within sight of the far-seeing eye of the manager.

Despite the absence of funds, the work of engaging the company went merrily on. Swarms of artists made application for positions.

"Some actors would rather play Shakespeare than

eat," was Bill's comment on the glut in the classical market.

Sitting alone in the office at the close of the day the last engagement was made, he heard a timid knock on the door.

Nobody responding to his "Come in!" he repeated the invitation in a loud, angry voice.

The door slowly opened, revealing the little Van Balken standing abashed on the threshold.

Leaving his desk, Bill took his visitor by the hand and said with gentle apology:

"I did n't know it was you, or I should n't have yelled like that."

A grateful glance shot from the girl's downcast eyes

"It did frighten me some, just a little bit," was her lisping reply; "but I 'm all right now."

"You 're always all right, kid."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Truetell."

As she entered the room, Bill noted her pleased expression when she saw the imposing roll-top desk and the large revolving chair in front of it.

"I 'm so glad you 're on your feet again, Mr. Truetell," she said.

"Bless your heart, child, this furniture is n't mine. I 'm not on my feet yet. I 'm only able to sit up and take the ladle in my mouth if somebody holds it."

"Well, you 'll be on top again soon. I 've kept telling them you were no 'has been.'"

"Telling whom?"

"Ma and pop. They said you were down and out."

"And you did n't believe it?"

"Not a bit of it!" she declared with pretty emphasis.

"Good girl. And how are ma and pop?"

"They 've gone on the road. Got a chance to do character work in 'The Persian Widowers.' They left last Tuesday."

"Why did n't they take you along?"

"There was no part for me, and the manager said our specialty was too old-fashioned. I came, Mr. Truetell, to see if you had anything for me in your new show. I hear," she concluded with a knowing air, "it 's going to be something swell and elegant."

"I 'm afraid you 're too late, kid," he regretfully said. "All the places are filled, and besides, this is n't in your line. It 's the 'legitimate,' you know."

"The 'legitimate'? What 's that, Mr. Truetell?"

"Why, it 's altogether different from singing and dancing. It 's very serious; it 's — it 's — like this —" The manager folded his arms, lowered his chin on his breast, and stalked savagely about the office.

"Is that the 'legitimate,' Mr. Truetell?"

"That will give you an idea of it."

"It does n 't scare me for a second. Watch me."

The little Van Balken folded her arms and gave a lifelike imitation of the manager strutting tragically

around the room, to the infinite amusement of Bill, who clapped his hands and said,

"The Little Van Balken Folded her Arms, Strutting Tragically about the Room"

"On the level, I think you 're a natural actress and could play 'most anything."

"Sure as you 're born!" was the confident reply. "Acting 's acting, whatever you call it. I was raised

on the stage. The 'legitimate' would be candy for me."

She came a little closer to Bill and lisped, "Please find a place for me in your company, Mr. Truetell. I won't take up much room."

Again Bill saw in her countenance the wistful, pleading expression that had won his sympathy the opening night of "The Gay Gothamites" in Branton.

"I 'm afraid I can't, kid."

The girl pouted her lips.

"If it was only my own show all alone," Bill declared vehemently, "nothing should stop you from coming along, but you see this is a new line for me. Mr. Steelson 's the whole thing as far as engaging the people goes. Several of 'em were with him before, and now the company 's full and —"

"'Nough said," she interrupted cheerily; "never mind me. I see what you 're up against."

"That 's a brave girl, but if you don't fill the first vacancy in the troupe I 'll resign my job."

"It 's a bargain!" said the little Van Balken. Laughing lightly and shaking her forefinger at him warningly, she added, "But take care it is n't the leading man's place."

Bill seized the tiny finger and drew her toward him. The girl, still laughing, made a playful show of resistance. It was a crucial moment in their destiny. The man was burning with a sudden desire to crush her

fragile little body in his arms and smother her pale face with his kisses. Instinctively he felt she would not repel him; yet he halted on the very brink. Something, he knew not what, restrained him. For the first time in his life, perhaps, he was inspired with genuine respect for womankind. A wave of ennobling impulse swept over him. Keeping her at arms' length he held her hands tightly in his, regarding her seriously and steadily. She was no plaything to be caressed at will. The little Van Balken became sacred in Bill's eyes as, looking into hers, they saw the purity reflected there. The sight cleansed his soul.

After she went away Bill sat long at his desk pondering over his sudden transformation. Why had he never regarded her in this strange light before? Wherein did she differ from all the other girls that had amused him at odd intervals from his early manhood? Was he not the same Bill Truetell? What was this mysterious influence which had stolen into his being?

"I guess it must be something in this 'legitimate' business," was his final solution of the psychological problem.

CHAPTER XII

FORT BENSON SURRENDERS

A WEEK before the date set for the unloading of the classical treasures of the Steelson repertoire upon an unsuspecting American public, the financial condition of the company reached an acute stage. True, there were scenery and properties belonging to the star, used by him in previous tours and now safely stowed away in a storehouse on Twenty-ninth Street, but it was equally true that the unfeeling storage manager refused to release them until his rent charges were paid in spot cash — no promises nor stage money accepted.

"Leave him to me," announced the star grandiloquently, on hearing the news. Confident that his presence would overawe the creditor into a state of fawning submission, Mr. Steelson made a visit to the Twenty-ninth Street establishment and handed his card to the person in charge. To the actor's intense astonishment the man after reading the illustrious name did not fall on his knees and beg to be forgiven. He merely squinted in a curious manner at his distinguished caller and uttered a long drawn out, "Well!"

The storehouse keeper was manifestly determined not to be overawed — or even awed — in the faintest degree. The star, recognizing his determination, changed his own demeanor with protean quickness, smiled benignly, and said, "Of course you know what I want."

"And of course you know what I want," was the ready response, with emphasis laid on both of the personal pronouns.

Here was a dilemma entirely unlooked for. The star revolved the situation rapidly in his mind, and decided on another change of attitude. He adopted a pleading tone, skilfully summoned a tear to each eye, and drew a vivid picture of the sufferings which would be entailed on his audiences if forced to see his performances without the proper scenic environment. If the storage boss felt no pity for him he should at least be merciful to them. But pity and mercy were not factors in the makeup of this matter-of-fact man. They did not occupy valuable space in his storehouse, he bluntly stated, and he did not propose to shelter the Steelson belongings simply for the honor of having them under his roof. Moreover, he had no sympathy whatever for the waiting multitudes along the Steelson route. Whether they saw Mr. Steelson without scenery, or scenery without Mr. Steelson, was no concern of his. He was wrapped up in his own welfare, which demanded money instead of conversation for

value received. When his bill was paid the production would be released; not a moment before.

This heartless summing up of the situation jarred the artistic sensibilities of the star. His mission a complete failure, he made a quick, unstagelike exit.

In line with the malicious retention of the Steelson goods and chattels in storage was the unpardonable conduct of various landladies in whose rooms the Steelson artists were lodged. On learning of the date fixed for the departure of the troupe, notices were promptly served that board bills must be paid before trunks could be removed from the premises. The recipients of the notices, being without the means of adjusting their accounts, took them to the manager, whose brain was already reducing itself to a corroded state in the effort to conquer the storage problem, the railroad-ticket problem, and divers other matters requiring cash settlements.

"Of course you 'll take care of these bills for us," said the artists, as they cheerfully handed the manager their overdue obligations.

"Anything to oblige you," replied Bill with a counterfeit smile. "Tell your landladies to have patience for a day or two and I 'll see what I can do."

He shoved the accounts in his pocket, and his brain resumed its grind. To meet all the demands for money the executive head of the Steelson organization did not possess a solitary cent, and his distinguished

partner was reduced to the same negative financial condition. There was every indication at this time that the Steelson tour would extend no further than the imaginations of the two men who had planned it in Battery Park. But a helping hand was unwittingly stretched out from an unexpected quarter.

The proprietor of a brand-new opera house in Fort Benson, Pennsylvania, was in urgent need of a suitable attraction for his opening night. Accidentally hearing of his necessity, Bill promptly sent him a long "collect" telegram, stating in substance that he might possibly arrange to give him the great Rupert Steelson in a complete classical production if terms were made agreeable.

The superior tone of the communication made so favorable an impression on the mind of the recipient of the message that he paid the collect charges without a murmur.

All the circumstances in the case pointed toward a successful termination of the negotiations. The Fort Bensonian was indulging in his first venture in the show business, and was therefore unacquainted with its legerdemain processes. Rupert Steelson had never appeared in Fort Benson, consequently his name stood in high repute among its citizens. Moreover, a "classical production" was deemed eminently appropriate for the dedication of the new playhouse.

In the answer from Fort Benson, Bill read with delight that Rupert Steelson would be a satisfactory

opening attraction. As far as terms were concerned, the writer modestly stated that he would rely on the riper experience of Mr. Steelson's manager.

The man of riper experience immediately wired that he could not accept less than a five-hundred-dollar guarantee, and half of this sum must be remitted at once as evidence of the good faith and financial stability of the Fort Benson manager. That guileless gentleman on receiving the message was more impressed than ever. Questioning of his financial stability and requiring half the guarantee to be paid down reflected credit, he believed, on the business-like methods of Truetell, whose own financial standing, he assumed, must be of the highest.

The more consideration he gave Bill's proposition the stronger became his inclination to accept, but he finally decided to let the matter rest overnight and wait for the sober second thought of the morning. In this decision he reckoned without his correspondent, who, after two hours alternately spent between the brightest hope and the darkest despair, sent this peremptory despatch to Fort Benson:

Unless I hear from you immediately must positively book Steelson elsewhere. Several other places wiring me for date. Answer quick.

TRUETELL.

It was a long gambling chance, but it won. The house of the Fort Benson magnate was a good half-

hour's journey from the telegraph office, yet he covered it in half that time in his eagerness to supervise personally the sending of an answer of unqualified acceptance, also remitting by wire the two hundred and fifty dollars.

Through the complete success of this master stroke of diplomacy the mobility of the Steelson company became a certainty. Creditors were satisfied, temporarily at least, preliminary details were arranged, and everything put in shape for the initial performance which Bill, by a dexterous shifting of dates, arranged to give in Fort Benson. The balance of the guarantee there would give the show a sufficiently strong momentum to carry it farther on its route.

Dan Darnold, who went to Fort Benson ahead of the attraction, sent back to Bill glowing predictions of what would happen when the company arrived to open the new opera house. Coming from Darnold, the rosy forecast was accepted as entirely worthy of credence, since this advance representative was ordinarily a cold-blooded individual with a reputation for rarely venturing a prophecy regarding box-office results.

"This town," Darnold wrote, "is simply crazy over its new theatre. In my judgment, the day of the dedication will cause Fourth of July and Christmas to look like plugged quarters. They are making a hero out of me, and I am only the agent of the troupe. They won't do a solitary thing to Steelson."

It was Bill's privilege to sit in the seat with the star on the train carrying the company to its first stand. The other members of the organization took a whole seat each for personal use, and the remaining vacant places in the car for the accommodation of their belongings. Having thus secured possession of the entire coach by the right of eminent domain, their journey began.

The run was only a few hours in length. The artist who honored Bill by his proximity divided the time between short naps and longer questions regarding the town they were travelling to and the celebration planned. Bill had received much information from Darnold, and was able to answer most of his queries. The place, he explained to him, was named Fort Benson presumably because never in its entire history had it contained a fortified affair of any sort.

Reverting to the dedication of the new theatre, Bill informed Steelson that the promoter and owner of the playhouse was the principal man of the town, who had grown wealthy by paying small wages to his townspeople, nearly all of whom worked in his factories. For some mysterious reason, he had long been considered a public benefactor, and now that he had built a theatre which would enable him to increase his means at the further expense of his employees, he was venerated as an idol. His name was Colonel John Phœnix Frothingham.

"What 's that?" broke in the star. "Tell me his name again."

Bill complied.

"Colonel John Phœnix Frothingham," echoed Mr. Steelson. "I must remember the name. I may be called on for a speech. Colonel — John — Phœnix — Frothingham," he repeated, dwelling with emphasis on each word. "It 's a hard name to fasten in my memory. Why was n't it John Jones?"

He continued the repetition, first in audible tones and afterward in low, incoherent murmurs, until he fell into another doze, which lasted until the train halted at Fort Benson.

If any doubt existed about the extent of the town's enthusiasm, it was dispelled by the sight of the hundreds of Fort Bensonians who swarmed about the little depot. They gave three vociferous cheers as the cars stopped, while the local band at the end of the platform struck up "Hail to the Chief!"

"Really," said Mr. Steelson, waking from his nap and looking out at the crowd, "this is positively more than I expected. Perhaps they 'll want me to make a speech now. What did you say that man's name was — Colonel John — Phœnix — "

His endeavor to recall the name was interrupted by the sudden entrance into the car of a delegation of excited townspeople. They were headed by a wild-eyed, flushed-cheeked youth of one or two and twenty,

who panted for breath as he called out, "Which is Rupert Steelson?"

Bill stepped forward, introduced himself as the star's manager, and led the young man to Mr. Steelson's seat.

"How are you, Mr. Steelson?" he blurted out. "My name 's Lieutenant Frothingham. I 'm Colonel Frothingham's son. They sent me down to bring you up to our house. They want you to stop there while you 're in town."

His use of the plural pronoun inclined Bill to suspect that his paternal parent did not monopolize the domestic prerogatives; later, when he met the maternal end of the Frothingham household, this suspicion merged into a firm belief.

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Steelson, replying to the invitation, "but I must ask you to excuse me. I am not feeling very well, and besides, arrangements have already been made for me at the hotel."

Neither of these reasons had the slightest foundation in fact. Several years before, he had formed a resolve never to accept offers of hospitality such as the Frothinghams extended.

"I used to do so once in a while," he afterward confided to Bill, "but it would have killed me if I had kept it up. Instead of being entertained, I had to do all the entertaining."

Lieutenant Frothingham unsuccessfully tried his

powers of persuasion on Mr. Steelson. Finally the young man turned to Bill.

"What 's your name?" he abruptly demanded. The manager gave him the information, though only a few minutes had elapsed since he had introduced himself to him.

"Oh, that 's it, is it?" he said. "Well, now you must make him go with me up to the house. He 'll do as you say. You 're his manager."

Bill did not have leisure to explain to the lieutenant the difference between managing a dramatic star and a trained bear, so he simply assured him it would be impossible for his invitation to be accepted.

"Then at least you 'll let me drive you both to the hotel," persisted the youth. This request was acceded to. They left the train and climbed into the high, two-seated open carriage to which the lieutenant escorted them. The ride to the hotel would have lasted only half a minute if they had gone directly thither, for it was located just around the corner from the station, but young Frothingham, who proudly held the reins in the front seat while the star and Bill sat meekly behind him, followed a roundabout course through the principal streets, giving the trip the appearance of a Roman triumph.

It was easy to see that Fort Benson was expecting Mr. Steelson. The business of the town was suspended; the entire population in the streets. Adults

stood in groups on the sidewalks, a juvenile contingent acted as a body-guard for the carriage, and the town band formed a tuneful rear-guard for the procession. Mr. Steelson's countenance wore one of his choicest stage smiles.

When the street exhibition was finished, the star complained of fatigue and asked the hotel clerk to have him shown to his room at once. Bill accompanied him and remained while he took off his clothes, donned his pajamas, and stretched himself on the bed.

"I hope there won't be any more racket till night," Mr. Steelson remarked, with a sigh of relief, "for now I feel thoroughly at ease." His appearance did not belie his feelings. He furnished a picturesque illustration of genuine comfort as he reclined on the old-fashioned bed, his blue pajamas forming a striking contrast to the red coverlet, while his bald head minus his wig scarcely made a dent in the hard pillow. Lighting a cigar, he blew strong puffs of smoke toward the ceiling, as if trying to pierce the cracks in the plastering. Bill was about to withdraw from the scene of contentment, when a loud knock on the door was heard. The next second a half-drunk, stumpy person launched himself unceremoniously into the room.

"Ah, Rupe," he exclaimed, as he caught sight of the pajama-clad figure. "My old friend Rupe! Don't you remember Aby Klein, who worked with you in stock in Baltimore thirty years ago?"

If Mr. Steelson had forgotten he certainly did not strain his memory by attempting to recall him. The familiar use of the star's first name failed to prepossess the intruder in Mr. Steelson's favor. No one, to Bill's

"'Ah, Rupe,' he Exclaimed. 'My Old Friend Rupe!'"

knowledge, had ever presumed to take this liberty, and he could hardly credit his hearing when the utterly undignified appellation of "Rupe" fell from the lips of the visitor. It savored strongly of the sacrilegious. Aby did not so regard it.

"You 'll remember me all right, Rupe, when you

get time to think," he said, reassuringly. "Why, I handled 'props' the night you first appeared in 'Blue-Eyed Nelly'— long before you tackled the 'legit.' "

At his mention of a comedy which was always a source of pride to Mr. Steelson, that eminent artist relaxed his features a little and arose from the bed to greet his old associate.

"Ah, I thought you 'd remember me, Rupe, old chap," cried Aby, giving the actor a friendly punch on the shoulder that nearly knocked him over. "What a night we 'd all have together here if poor old Jim Adams was alive."

The stumpy individual tried to keep old Jim's memory green by watering it with a tear or two, and proceeded with a rambling story of his own experiences up to his present engagement as property man in the new "op'ry" house in Fort Benson.

"I 've been telling some of my friends — good fellows every one of them — here in town about our high old times together, Rupe," he said in conclusion, "and if you don't mind, I 'll introduce you to them after the performance, and we 'll make a night of it."

"My dear sir," said the star to his caller, "if you 'll excuse me, I 'll finish the rest I was enjoying before you came in."

Aby showing no disposition to go, Bill helped him to the stairway, and he went downstairs muttering that it was "very different from the days of old Jim Adams."

CHAPTER XIII

THE NEW "OP'RY" HOUSE

WHEN Bill returned to Mr. Steelson's room the distinguished actor had composed himself and his pajamas once more upon the red coverlet. Again there was a knock at the door, which was opened almost simultaneously by a stout, pompous old gentleman, who asked which of the occupants of the room was Mr. Steelson. Bill waved his hand in the direction of the pajama-clad form on the bed.

"Delighted!" said the pompous gentleman, with a stiff bow. "I feel honored, sir; honored. While you are in Fort Benson, sir, I will be pleased to show you round, sir; round, sir. I know the best people here, sir, and it will be an honor for me to introduce you. Make yourself perfectly at home, sir; perfectly at home."

When he stopped for breath, the star interjected: "Who, in the name of Heaven or a warmer place, are you, sir?"

"I 'm the landlord of the hotel, sir," was the reply.

"Well, Mr. Landlord," returned the pestered

actor, "if you 'll go downstairs again I 'll ring for you when I want you."

The landlord protested. The star shut his eyes and kept them closed until the host withdrew.

"Do you know," said Mr. Steelson, when he opened his eyes, and looked around to be sure they were really alone, "I did n't mind what he said so much, but I 'll be hanged if I 'll stand this habit of bursting into my room unannounced. If it 's the custom of the town, it 's time they changed it."

Bill left the actor to reflect on Fort Benson's etiquette, and walked up the street to the new "op'ry" house. Going through the long lobby and entering the auditorium, he saw, to his surprise, that, though it was early in the afternoon, many of the chairs were already occupied. He asked Lieutenant Frothingham, whom he met at the door, if the people expected a *matinée* performance.

"No," was his response, "they 're just seeing how their seats feel. 'Sort of getting accustomed to them for to-night."

Apparently the occupants of the plush chairs were determined to receive full value for the money invested in tickets. To add to their enjoyment, the electrician stood at his switchboard and pulled the levers one by one that lit up the various parts of the theatre. With each flash of light, a chorus of "ohs" and "ahs" went up from the admiring Fort Bensonians.

"There 's my father and mother," announced the lieutenant, pointing to a private box on the right. "We 'll go around and I 'll introduce you to them."

Bill followed him to the box where the Frothinghams were sitting in state gazing down, with an air of conscious superiority, on the common herd in the orchestra seats.

"Father," said the lieutenant, "this is Mr. Steelson's manager, Mr. —. Let 's see, what is your name?"

For the second time that afternoon Bill answered the question. To avoid any further lapses of memory, he took his card from his pocket and handed it to the young man, who in turn handed it to his father. The latter, having glanced at the name, briefly expressed his gratitude to Bill for arranging for Mr. Steelson's appearance, and then dutifully handed the card to his wife. In many respects they were an interesting couple. The colonel was tall and well proportioned. He had a closely cropped gray beard, a Pecksniffian expression, and a bearing suggestive of active military service, though all his fighting, as Darnold had told Bill, had been done by proxy. Darnold had further informed him that the townspeople, having formed the habit of calling the father "colonel," simply because he looked the part, had dubbed the son "lieutenant" for no better reason.

Mrs. Frothingham, in her shoes, stood just half

as high as her husband, but in her own estimation she towered away above him. She was the owner of a peaked nose, and black snappy eyes that appeared

COLONEL FROTHINGHAM

to be constantly making a circuit of everything in the theatre, from the large glistening chandelier hanging from the ceiling to the bright blue carpet on the aisles.

Bill shook hands with the Frothinghams, congratulating them on the new opera house and the pleasure they must feel on its completion.

"Yes," responded the colonel, and he astonished Bill by giving a long-drawn sigh; "it would be pleasant indeed but for one thing. Look there."

He made a gesture toward a chair draped in mourning occupying a prominent position in the front of the box.

"The 'vacant chair,'" said the colonel with another sigh. "If our married daughter was alive she would sit in it to-night, but she died just six months ago. It was a terrible blow to us. Her husband and her little baby will be with us to-night; but nobody will use the chair. It will be reserved for Mary's spirit if she can come."

Bill had faith enough in the excellence of the performance not to doubt that it would prove vastly entertaining for Mary's spirit, if she had no other engagement for that evening. To the Frothinghams, however, he made no suggestion of this sort. The colonel's grief appeared to be genuine, and his method of parading it was purely a matter of taste.

Mrs. Frothingham's reflections were not as gloomy as her husband's.

"I 've been thinking," she chirruped, "how we ought to come into this box to-night. It won't do to enter before all the folks out there are seated," motion-

ing as she spoke toward her subjects in the plush seats; "and I don't like the idea of waiting in the lobby where people coming in can see us. I think, after all, we ought to stay on the stage until just before the curtain is ready to go up. Then we can come out through the side door and make our entrance. I think the effect will be much better that way. Don't you?" she asked, turning to Bill for an expert opinion.

Seeing that the mistress of the Frothingham household was bent on making what Bill would term a "grand-stand play," he secured a warm place in her regard by declaring that the idea could not be improved. Thereupon the little lady showed her appreciation of his judgment by offering to conduct him personally over the theatre. He accepted, and made the tour of inspection under her escort, her husband and son walking submissively behind. When the examination of the interior was finished they visited the box-office. The ticket-seller was engaged in an animated conversation with a buxom lady, who was as undecided about the purchase of her tickets as if she was selecting goods at a dry-goods counter.

"I don't like those seats at all," she was saying, pointing to a couple that had just been shown to her. "Have n't you anything near the Ridleys?" The omniscient man in the box-office informed her that every location near the Ridleys was taken.

"Too bad. I 'd like to be near Mrs. Ridley so 's

we could have a nice long talk while the play 's going on. My husband could tell me all about it when we got home."

"I can give you two right in front of the Hortons," insinuated the ticket-seller.

"Kin ye? Right in front? I 'll take them. Now that Horton woman kin see she ain't the only one in Fort Benson with a new bonnet. Young man, I 'm much obliged."

She produced a net purse and paid for the tickets. As she turned to go there was a telephone ring in the box-office. The ticket-seller answered the call. It proved to be an order, "the two best seats in the house," for a young man and woman who were to be married at seven o'clock that evening.

"It is n't possible," Bill said, "that they intend to come right here after the ceremony and sit in full view of everybody?"

Neither the Frothinghams nor the ticket-seller could see anything remarkable in the procedure.

"Why should n't they come here?" asked Mrs. Frothingham. "What better place in town could they go to?"

From her last question, Bill drew the conclusion that going out of town for a honeymoon was not the fashion in Fort Benson. He made no further comment, but his mind busied itself with reflections on the strange play that would be enacted without words

before the curtain of the new "op'ry" house that night; a play in which the principal features would be the gruesome "vacant chair" in the private box and the happy young bridal couple in "the two best seats in the house."

When he returned to the hotel it was time for supper, which Mr. Steelson and his manager partook of together. The star was in much better humor now. He had locked his door, he informed Bill, and having thus made himself safe from intrusions he had enjoyed a long nap. There was only one interruption, when he thought he heard his stumpy acquaintance calling "Rupe." Bill suggested that he had dreamed it, and Mr. Steelson thought it probable. His acquiescence in the suggestion was not unusual, since conceit in this form was not one of his characteristics. In this respect he had few parallels among the stars of his generation.

Supper over, Mr. Steelson and Bill proceeded to the theatre and went immediately on the stage. There they found the Frothinghams, father, mother, son, son-in-law, and grandson, waiting to make their entrance. The baby was such a noisy youngster that Bill drew a mental picture of an interrupted performance. He expressed a fear to Mr. Steelson, who replied good-naturedly, "Oh, never mind. This is their night, and we 'll let them do as they please. The child will have to be pretty loud to break up this show."

While Lieutenant Frothingham was introducing the star to his relatives, Bill went out to the front of the theatre to watch the crowds, already flocking in. The first-night patrons of the Opera House had no difficulty in entering the outer door and moving the length of the lobby. Passing by the ticket-taker at the inner portal appeared to be an impossible proposition. At that point the Fort Bensonians were wedged in a solid mass against the doorkeeper, whose face wore a hopeless expression as he begged them to take their time, and "not rush like a lot of football players."

Something was radically wrong with the arrangements for seating the people, and it did not take long to discover the cause. The fault lay primarily with Lieutenant Frothingham and instrumentally with the ushers. The lieutenant, with his inherited and acquired military knowledge, had carefully instructed the ushers how to walk, how to stand, how to bow, and how to wear their bright new uniforms. He had overlooked one rather important particular — to familiarize them with the locations and numbers of the different seats. Not having the faintest idea of the whereabouts of a certain orchestra chair, for instance, it was naturally a trying and tedious task for an usher to lead to it the holder of a coupon. As a result, Bill saw several parties, composed of ushers and persons they were supposed to escort, wandering aimlessly up and down the aisles like people in a maze.

He recognized in one of these bands of wanderers a man whom he had seen "trying his chair" that afternoon.

When he passed Bill the manager plucked his sleeve.

"You know where your seat is, don't you?" he asked.

The Fort Bensonian retaliated, "Of course I know where it is, but we have to foller the usher just the same, don't we?"

When he was told that such a formality was not necessary, he made a bee-line for the right spot. His example proved contagious, and afterward the services of the ushers were dispensed with. The people ushered themselves, and those who did not know where their places were located, took any seats that were handy.

Among the last to arrive was the bridal couple. It needed nobody to point them out, since it could be plainly seen as they entered the theatre that this was their first appearance in public as man and wife. Arm in arm they walked down the aisle, both trying and failing to appear unconcerned. The bride wore the white dress in which she had been married. On her black hair rested a spray of smilax. Her cheeks glowed with blushes. There was not a trace of color in the groom's face. Attired in a black suit of store clothes, he marched stiffly along, his head tilted back, and his expression seeming to say, "Smile

at us, if you dare." Bill expected at least a little show of mirth when the spectators beheld the newly married pair, but the expectation was not realized. Nobody tittered; nobody even smiled. On the contrary, everybody appeared to regard it as the proper thing for the young man and his bride to start their honeymoon by going to the new "op'ry" house.

When they reached their places and sat down, the young man squared his shoulders and put his arm tenderly around the waist of his blushing bride, who graciously allowed it to remain there throughout the entire performance.

CHAPTER XIV

PLAYING "SHE STOOPS"

IT was now time for the play to begin. An overture of national airs had been tortured to death by the orchestra. The lights in the auditorium were dimmed, and the footlights turned up. Bill wondered why the curtain did not rise. He had forgotten that this was the opportune moment selected by Mrs. Frothingham for the entrance of herself and her relatives. All eyes were turned toward the private box.

Soon the draperies in the rear were parted, and the first family of Fort Benson made its appearance while the theatre resounded with applause. Lieutenant Frothingham led the way, carrying the baby, who in turn carried a large apple, evidently given it for quieting purposes. Next entered Mrs. Frothingham with the dignity of a queen, leaning on the arm of her bereaved son-in-law. The colonel, stately and alone, brought up the rear. There was another burst of applause when they took their seats. The baby waved its hands over the rail of the box as if to acknowledge the greeting. In doing so, unfortunately, it let fall its apple, which struck the bald head of a gentleman directly beneath.

A howl of anguish came from the victim, and a howl of enjoyment from the audience. The bald-headed man rubbed the sore spot, and the spectators roared again. Mrs. Frothingham smiled approvingly on the child.

It is pretty certain that Sir Isaac Newton discovered the law of gravity from watching the fall of an apple. It is equally certain that the fall of the apple in the Fort Benson Opera House so thoroughly upset the gravity of the townspeople that their merriment might have continued indefinitely if the curtain had not gone up on the first act of "She Stoops."

At the end of the first act, Lieutenant Frothingham rushed up to Bill. "I say," he blurted out, panting for breath as usual, "I want you to introduce me to the leading lady. She 's made a big hit with me, and mother thinks it will be all right for me to know her. Mother says she 'll let me take her out to supper after the show."

It had not occurred to the unsophisticated youth that the leading lady's consent was necessary. So Bill made no suggestion to that effect, conducting him into the presence of Miss Wentworth, who, dressed in a becoming gown of the eighteenth-century period, and a Gainsborough hat with big nodding black plumes, was sitting in her dressing-room awaiting the call for the second act. She was charming enough at that moment to have captivated an army of lieutenants. Young

Frothingham was terribly embarrassed as Bill performed the ceremony of the introduction. His face would not have been redder if he had applied the whole box of rouge on the actress's table.

He stammered out, "Delighted, Miss — er — Miss — er — By Jove! I can't think of your name. Soon — I — won't know my own. Well — anyway, Miss — Miss Actress — mother wants to know — that is — I want to know if you 'll let me take you to supper after the show?"

The leading lady's bright eyes twinkled.

"I shall be glad to accept," she replied, "if you 'll take my old man along, too. Here, Jim," calling to her husband, the lanky "character man" standing in the wings. "Jim," she repeated when that elongated disciple of Thespis came up and was presented to the lieutenant, "Mr. Frothingham has invited us out to supper."

"Why, certainly," said Jim, "I 'm agreeable."

The lieutenant could not restrain a look of disappointment, though he stuttered out a sentence in which Bill thought he could distinguish the word "delighted."

The call for the second act summoned the leading lady and Jim. When they had hurried away the lieutenant uncorked his wrath with, "Pretty smart trick, I call it."

"Whose," Bill innocently inquired, "the leading lady's or Jim's?"

"Neither of them. Yours. You might have told me she was married."

"You might have asked me," Bill rejoined.

"All right. I 'm game. I won't squeal," stoically declared the scion of the house of Frothingham. "I 'll take 'em out to supper."

"I 'm sure the three of them will enjoy it," Bill suggested.

"You mean the three of us," corrected the lieutenant.

"No, I mean the three of them," and Bill explained to him that the young girl who played the *ingênue* part was their daughter, who always accompanied her parents wherever they went.

"If that 's the case, I'd better invite the whole blooming troupe," was the lieutenant's sarcastic response.

He went away to consult his mother, while Bill made a call on Mr. Steelson. The star, though nearly threescore years of age, was impersonating Tony Lumpkin, a youth of twenty, supposed to be constantly bubbling over with boyish enthusiasm. Mr. Steelson, despite his years, merged his own solemn personality in the part so completely that he carried an exuberance of spirit to his dressing-room between the acts. On this occasion he was in high glee as Bill entered.

"Colonel Frothingham 's just been in here," he chuckled, "and asked me to make a speech and say

something nice about him after the second act. Now, I 'm no orator, but I 'll try my best, just to oblige him. After the second act is the right time for a speech because we always get a big curtain call then in this piece. I want you to be in front to hear me orate."

Bill promised the star he would listen to his address. Returning to the front lobby he met the only reporter of the only paper in Fort Benson. When Bill told him that Mr. Steelson was going to speak to the audience, he hustled down to his office for a pad of copy paper, returning just as the second act was drawing to a close. Dragging a table and a chair out of the box-office, he seated himself and prepared to write down the actor's remarks. The curtain descended at the end of the act. The newspaper man moistened the point of his pencil on his lips, adjusted his paper pad, and held the tips of his fingers of his left hand to the tip of his left ear in an expectant attitude. A painful silence ensued.

"Why don't he come out and speak?" the scribe asked Bill.

"It 's the spectators' fault," the manager replied. "Why don't they applaud?" Bill glanced toward the Frothingham box and noticed that the colonel had assumed an expression eminently appropriate for a man who expected to hear himself praised. Still there was no hand-clapping to bring the star before the curtain. The climax of the act which, according to the star, had never before failed to evoke round after round of

applause, did not appeal in the slightest degree to the phlegmatic inhabitants of Fort Benson. Bill tried to start the hand-clapping, with the result that everybody in his vicinity stared at him in amazement. In his despair he hurried back on the stage.

Some stars, disappointed at the loss of a curtain call, would have vented their spleen on everybody in sight. Mr. Steelson, still imbued with the personality of rollicking Tony Lumpkin, grinned broadly when he saw Bill, and winked both eyes in succession to evince his amusement still further.

"Poor Colonel Frothingham," said he with a humorous groan. "Poor Colonel Frothingham! He wanted me to tell them how great he was, and they did n't give me the chance. What 's the matter with those folks out front, anyway? I 'll bet nine-tenths of them never saw a play before in their lives. Poor Colonel Frothingham! Let 's try to get a look at him."

They peeped out through the corner of the curtain, and beheld the object of the star's sympathy sitting dejectedly in the box.

"What a shame!" laughed Mr. Steelson. "Can't we do something to relieve that distress?"

Bill hinted that he might be able to work up a call at the end of the next act, if the star would be ready to go right out and speak.

"Go ahead, by all means," acquiesced the actor.

The working-up process consisted in instructing

the ushers to station themselves in various parts of the theatre and applaud for all they were worth as the curtain fell. This artificial enthusiasm, combined with the manual exertions of Bill and the reporter, proved infectious. The audience applauded so generously that Mr. Steelson lost no time in making his appearance before the curtain. There was more hand-clapping as the star advanced to the footlights.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he commenced, "I must first congratulate you on this beautiful new theatre. I have played all over the United States, and I can say with sincerity there is no place of amusement in the whole country, not even in Broadway, New York City, that can surpass it. Yes, I will go still further, and state that very few can equal it."

As he made this broad, sweeping prevarication every auditor pounded his palms vigorously and looked proudly at his neighbor.

Continuing to toy with the truth, the speaker said: "I must also congratulate you on having as a fellow-citizen my old and dear friend, Colonel James Phœnix Frothingham, whose self-sacrifice and devotion to your interests have caused this theatre to be a reality."

Bill hoped for Mr. Steelson's sake that the audience did not notice that he referred to Colonel Frothingham as James instead of John, a mistake hardly consistent with his claim of old and dear friendship.

Unmindful of his error, he went on, "It was on

account of my desire to show my respect for my old friend that I came to assist at this dedication."

More hearty applause from the auditors, who knew nothing about the guarantee exacted for the appearance of the company.

Concluding, the actor said: "I trust that Colonel Frothingham and the magnificent opera house he has erected will long remain with you. For my part, if my humble efforts to-night to entertain you have been successful, I promise to make a return visit next season for the same consideration — I mean, the same consideration of friendship for my boyhood's friend, the colonel, God bless him!"

The applause which the peroration evoked was thunderous and long continued. Colonel Frothingham, apparently overcome with emotion at the star's reference to their boyhood's happy days, held his handkerchief to his eyes. There were cries for him to take the stage. He obeyed the summons, and came before the curtain hand in hand with Mr. Steelson. It was a touching sight to behold the two life-long friends, who in reality had never met each other until that evening, standing before an innocent audience which could hardly control its excitement over the inspiring spectacle. Of the two, Colonel Frothingham was the more visibly affected, though Mr. Steelson was not far behind in the emotional display. The people called on the colonel for a speech. He stammered a sentence or two

"There Was a Loud Crash, and Lady and Tree Went Over Together"

to the effect that his feelings at that moment could not possibly be expressed, then he broke down, shook the actor's hand with a convulsive grasp, and hurried from view. The self-constituted friend of his boyhood also retired, while the orchestra played "Auld Lang Syne."

The next act was the last. Written by Mr. Steelson, he had always considered it the most amusing in the piece. In Fort Benson it proved to be more effective than ever before on account of an accident that happened to Mrs. Jameson, a stout lady, who for several seasons had played old woman roles in the Steelson company. The scene was laid in a wood. In the centre stood a large set tree with a bench in front. The tree in previous performances had been fastened so securely with stage braces that when Mrs. Jameson sat on the bench and leaned against the painted trunk it had easily withstood the pressure. Something was decidedly wrong somewhere when the actress reached this part of the performance in Fort Benson. Either the tree itself had developed a weakness, or the stage braces had been imperfectly placed by the inexperienced hands of the new theatre, for when the rotund actress sat down to rest her shoulders on the stage oak, and say, wearily, "Ah! here at last is shelter and repose," there was a loud crash, and the lady and the tree went over and down together. The spectators shrieked their approval. There was not a person in the audience who did not believe the back somersault was

part of the play. So many ludicrous situations had occurred in the comedy it seemed perfectly consistent for Mrs. Jameson to run the risk of concussion of the spine. It also appeared entirely natural to the spectators when Mr. Steelson rushed upon the stage to the actress's assistance, extemporizing, "My good woman, let me help you." The star's happy thought would have worked to a charm if he could have extemporized sufficient strength at the same time. When he tried to lift the two hundred and fifty odd pounds of the overturned Mrs. Jameson, his force was so inadequate that the brawny carpenter who travelled with the company hurried to aid him. Through their combined efforts the actress was raised to a perpendicular position and assisted from the stage, while the spectators continued in convulsions of laughter, firmly convinced that the episode was the climax of the comedy.

"It beats anything," a woman in the rear row said, "how a big woman can throw herself around like that night after night without getting hurt."

Early the next morning the Rupert Steelson Company departed from Fort Benson. While waiting in the depot for the train to arrive, Bill noticed that all the actors and actresses were on hand except the *ingénue*.

"Where is your daughter?" he asked the leading lady.

She replied: "Maud is having a stroll with young

Frothingham. He took the three of us out to supper last night, and that girl of mine simply monopolized him. Ah, there they come."

The lieutenant was carrying her satchel. When the train arrived he assisted her on board and found a comfortable seat for her on the shady side of the car.

Their good-bye was protracted and slightly pathetic for so brief an acquaintance. As the train left the station the lieutenant stood despondently on the depot platform straining his eyes for a last glimpse of the *ingénue*, who kissed her hand to him from the car window. That duty performed, the young actress took writing materials from her satchel and commenced to scribble an affectionate letter to the man in New York to whom she was engaged.

CHAPTER XV

THE NEW "OSRIC"

"TRUETELL," said the star as the train sped on its journey to the next stand, "they like me in Fort Benson."

"They certainly passed you the glad hand last night," his manager returned.

"When I play there next season," Mr. Steelson solemnly announced, "I will do the Dane."

Bill gave a slight start and looked doubtfully at the actor.

"Yes," continued the star, even more solemnly than before, "I will do the Dane."

"What has the Dane done to you?" was Bill's innocent query.

Mr. Steelson had nought but pity for a man who could propound such a question. "The Dane is Hamlet," he explained.

Bill laughed heartily at his own blunder.

"By the way," the star went on. "We give them the Moor to-night, don't we?"

"No, sir. 'Othello.'"

"Same thing. I forget you are serving your novitiate at the shrine of the Bard."

"You 've got me guessing again," the unsophisticated manager confessed. "What 's the Bard?"

"You don't mean to admit you never heard of the Bard — the Bard of Avon?"

Bill's face brightened. "I 've played Avon," said he. "It 's a fine little tank near Boston."

Mr. Steelson shook his head despairingly. "Let 's change the subject. Have you the repertoire for the week?"

He was handed the sheet of paper on which the list of plays was written, and he studied it intently.

"That 's good!" he remarked, "I do not do the Dane until Saturday in Bostwick. I 'm glad of that, for the piece needs more rehearsing, and Ranston will be in front to criticise."

"Ranston the playwright?"

"Ranston the alleged playwright," corrected the star. "He imagines he 's greater than Shakespeare. He wants to write a play for me. He says that Shakespeare has not done me justice and I will never succeed financially until I put on one of his melodramas."

"Maybe he 's right," Bill ventured to suggest, recalling the forty-five cents that had represented the sum total of the actor's savings at their meeting in Battery Park.

Mr. Steelson chided him for the observation. "Don't say that. It 's sacrilegious to mention Ranston and Shakespeare in the same breath.

"And after all," resumed the star, gracefully flicking a stray lock of his wig from his forehead and straightening himself in his seat while his features shone with glowing inspiration. "After all, what is financial compared with artistic success?"

Bill made rejoinder, "Just the difference between riding in a Pullman and counting the ties."

He had not intended to inflict any suffering by the comparison, but the blow was cruel, and it struck home.

His histrionic companion turned to him quickly, showing a countenance suddenly stamped with utter sadness.

"Nothing personal intended, I hope, Truetell," he said, in a voice betraying infinitely more sorrow than anger.

"Why, of course not," was Bill's prompt assurance.

"You know — " the star as he spoke made a throat movement, as if swallowing a rising tide of emotion, "there have been occasions in the career of nearly every great artist when he and the — the — the ties have not been entire strangers, but such occasions must lie buried in the vault of dead memories."

The star slowly shut his eyes, rested his head on the back of his seat, and his face assumed the rigidity of a death-mask.

He remained for a full quarter of an hour in a darkly retrospective state, until the cheerful, mer-

curial angel who watches over the children of Thespis came to his aid and put the gloomy spirit to flight.

Conversation between the two men was resumed, and once more the subject of "Hamlet" was taken up, and the necessity of further rehearsals discussed.

"Are you satisfied with the cast?" Bill inquired.

"The women are all right," responded Mr. Steelson, "because they have been with me for several seasons, though I must admit Mrs. Jameson has grown too stout for the Player Queen. Fortunately, the audience only sees little of her — I mean, she is on in but one act. Smolton is the best Ghost I ever had, and Henley is the funniest Gravedigger in the business. In fact, I can find little fault with any of the male characters except Osric. Hunt is simply impossible in the role. We must let him go and get a new Osric."

Bill, viewing the subject from an economical point of view, asked: "Could n't you double one of the other characters in the part?"

Mr. Steelson decisively shook his head. "To keep down expenses," he said, "I have doubled and even trebled the people beyond all rules and traditions, but I must draw the line on one actor playing two characters that are required to be on the stage at the same time. Besides, Hunt is not suited temperamentally. Osric is an effeminate person, and should really be played by a woman. All the great English Hamlets had female Osrics."

"I have it!" exclaimed Bill, who had been an interested spectator of the "Hamlet" rehearsals. "Ophelia 's drowned earlier in the shuffle. She can easily double with Osric. There you are!"

"A very good suggestion. You can notify Miss Wentworth to commence studying Osric at once."

The actor's eyes twinkled as they followed Bill down the aisle to the seat tenanted by the leading lady and her pet poodle.

"Sir, how dare you!" she cried indignantly when he explained his mission. "Ophelia double with Osric! Me, carried in on a bier in one act and frisking round in tights in the next? You are not running a cheap burlesque show, now, Mr. Truetell. How dare you?"

The manager attempted a quiet explanation: "Mr. Steelson asked me to speak to you and — "

"Oh! Mr. Steelson wants me to double Osric does he! Where is he?"

The actress arose defiantly and looked up and down the car, her poodle meanwhile barking loudly at Bill to attest his sympathy for his insulted mistress. When she caught sight of the star and noticed his highly amused expression, she appreciated his little joke, resuming her mental composure and her seat simultaneously.

"I guess I 'm pretty green in this Shakespearian game," confided Bill, after he had returned to his place at Mr. Steelson's side.

"We must have a little comedy now and then in the tragedy of life, Truetell."

"You fooled me for fair, Mr. Steelson. I honestly thought you needed an Osric."

"I do," the star replied with seriousness. "We ought to put somebody in rehearsal right away. Hunt will ruin the play if he goes on Saturday."

"And you prefer a girl?" asked Bill, a happy idea coming to him.

"Yes. Have you anybody in mind?"

"Just the one you need."

"Can she play the part?"

"Play it? She can eat it."

"All right. Engage her at once. Wire from the next stand."

The following message was sent upon the arrival of the train in Peabody:

ELSIE VAN BALKEN,
CARE ACTORS' SOCIETY, NEW YORK CITY.

You are engaged for Osric in Hamlet. Report for rehearsals Dalton, Pennsylvania, to-morrow. You must wear tights. TRUETELL.

After filing the telegram, Bill immediately was seized with many fears, all of which presaged the failure of his anxious desire to make the girl a member of the company. To begin with, the chances were against her receiving the message at all. He had neglected to obtain her home address when she called at his office, and

he was not sure that she was on the membership list of the Actors' Society. It was a fortnight since he had seen her. In the interval she had probably accepted another engagement. Such talent as she possessed would not remain long unemployed. But if she was still disengaged and his message reached her safely, an objection, which in Bill's imagination loomed up as an insurmountable obstacle, stood between her and her acceptance of this particular role. His reference in his telegram to Osric's costume was made advisedly and with the most chivalrous intentions. Knowing the girl's naturally timid disposition, he believed she would not consent to appear in boy's attire, but he considered himself in honor bound to notify her in advance what she was expected to wear, even though the notification should be the cause of her rejection of the offer. It would be unmanly and unfair to induce her to join the company, only to confront her point-blank with this vitally important matter.

All of Bill's fears and delicate scruples on the costume subject were set at rest when the reply was handed to him.

WILLIAM TRUETELL,
MANAGER STEELSON COMPANY, PEABODY, PA.
Thanks for engagement. Will leave first train tomorrow. Me for the tights. ELSIE VAN BALKEN.

Bill met the train that carried the new member to Dalton.

"This is a gamble I 've taken with you," he said, when they had shaken hands, "and you 've got to make good to square me. Pillsbury, the stage manager, will give you the part at rehearsal this afternoon. Study it good and plenty."

She pulled a yellow-covered paper book from her tiny muff, and waved it proudly before Bill's eyes.

"What 's that?"

"'Hamlet.' I bought it for fifteen cents in a second-hand book-store."

"Have you been memorizing the lines?"

"I know 'em backwards."

"Elsie, they don't make them like you every day."

"And I don't know many like you, Mr. Truetell."

"Quit your kiddin', kid."

He took her satchel, a battered relic of "The Gay Gothamites'" struggles, and led the way to the hotel situated right across the street.

"Give this young lady a nice sunny room with bath," he sternly commanded the clerk, after carefully signing her name to the register.

"A sunny room?" interrogated the clerk.

"That 's what I said."

"You probably did n't notice the stormy weather," suggested the man behind the desk. "It 's been raining steadily here for three days."

"No, I did n't notice the weather," returned Bill, beaming on the little Van Balken. "You can cut the

sun out of the order, and give her a nice room with bath."

"There is n't a bath in the town, sir."

Although there was a dominant note of pride in the clerk's voice, Bill was tempted to question the truth of his assertion, but he thought better of it.

"Well, then," he said, "make her as comfortable as you can."

A rehearsal of "Hamlet" was called that afternoon on the stage of the Dalton Grand Academy of Music, a building far less imposing than its name.

In the absence of Mr. Steelson, confined to his room by a cold, Pillsbury, the stage manager, sat in the director's chair. Away from the theatre Pillsbury was one of the most genial of men. While directing rehearsals his overbearing manners and tyrannous conduct made him unique even among the gentlemen of his calling, none of whom have ever been noted for an excess of Chesterfieldian courtesy while engaged in the performance of their duties.

All the members of the company were in attendance except Miss Van Balken. Bill, who had come to the theatre early to superintend the disposition of the scenery, cast many anxious glances at the stage door. It was two o'clock, the appointed hour of the rehearsal, and the new "Osric" had not arrived. The actors and actresses formed in little expectant groups about the stage. Pillsbury took out his watch and fidgeted in

his chair. Clouds gathered on his brow, and everybody knew a storm was brewing. When at last the stage

"'You're Five Minutes Late,' he Growled"

door slowly opened and the little Van Balken appeared, Pillsbury loudly called, "Is that the new 'Osric'?"

The belated actress feebly responded, "Yes, sir," and timidly approached the stage manager.

He glared at the face of his watch, and then bestowed a more threatening glance at the face of the frightened newcomer.

"You 're five minutes late," he growled; "this is a pretty bad start for a new member."

"If you please, sir," apologized the girl, "I 'd have been here on time but the car from the hotel was blocked, and — "

"I accept no excuses," was his stern interruption. "If it happens again I 'll fine you."

Bill from a position near the proscenium arch had been a sympathetic witness of the scene. The agony he endured was as great, if possible greater, than the suffering of his little *protégée*, standing crestfallen and humiliated before the tyrant Pillsbury. An impulse seized Bill to rush to her assistance, strike down the stage manager, take the girl in his arms, and proclaim before the whole company that nobody could deal harshly with her while he was by.

He did not act on the impulse. He hesitated for a moment only, and lost the golden opportunity of his life. Another threw his gauntlet into the lists as her champion.

Dodd, the juvenile man, a slight, fair-haired youth, jumped up from the trunk on which he had been sitting, and boldly said,

"That 's right about the car block, Mr. Pillsbury. I had trouble getting here myself."

"You 'll have no trouble getting away from here if you don't mind your own business," roared the director.

Dodd, the juvenile man, resumed his seat.

"And now that we 're all here — at last," Pillsbury sarcastically announced, with coldly significant glances at the little Van Balken and her juvenile defender, "we 'll begin to rehearse."

Bill left his position near the proscenium arch and walked to the stage door. He had no desire to remain for the rehearsal. He had seen his position as protector of the little Van Balken suddenly usurped through his own fatal hesitancy. He had seen the look of gratitude that Dodd received as his reward when he arose in her defence. He had seen her sweet expression of sympathy when the young actor in turn was crushed by the stage manager. In the eyes of the company Dodd was a squelched young upstart, but in the eyes of the girl he must stand as a hero. He, at least, had dared try to shield her in her helplessness while Bill had hesitated. Now it was too late. The golden opportunity would never come again, and the little Van Balken was lost to him forever.

This was his heartrending conviction as he left the Dalton Grand Academy of Music; a two hours' walk about the muddy streets of the town did not alter it. For all that time a green-eyed monster, celebrated in song and story, bore him close company.

CHAPTER XVI

THE RIVAL OF SHAKESPEARE

ELTON RANSTON, self-constituted rival of William Shakespeare, was Bostwick's most conspicuous citizen, and his reputation was by no means confined to the limits of his home town. Flashily colored lithographs depicting scenes in plays from his lurid pen carried his name and fame to every one-night stand in the country. Wherever a high or even an ordinary degree of intelligence existed among theatre-goers, the Ranston productions failed of appreciation, but the discrimination of audiences never furnished him cause for the faintest regret. According to his self-centred view, the people who did not relish his plays deserved pity rather than censure. If they did not possess the brand of mentality capable of grasping the significance of his wonderful creations, the fault and the loss were theirs, not his. Some day they might reach the lofty peak on which he stood, but in the meantime he could not wait for their minds to ripen. He had a vast mission to perform on that portion of the earth's surface circumscribed by the boundary lines of the United States. The great, low-browed, amusement-loving public hungered for at least six new Ranston

dramas every season. To a magnanimous desire to satisfy this craving, the author had devoted himself for several years with unremitting vigor and heroic persistence. Never for a moment had his unselfish brain harbored a temptation to disappoint his legion of admirers, nor, incidentally, to interrupt the current of royalties that flowed steadily to his account in the Bostwick Savings Bank.

The playwright's residence typified the material prosperity that followed as a fruit of his genius. It was a large, showy, Queen Anne sort of structure, situated in a fashionable suburb of the town. Surrounding the house a closely cropped, velvety lawn sloped in easy gradations to the street, where a high iron fence of ornamental design guarded the august personage and his household gods from the intrusion of the curious sightseer. The gate was flanked by two stone pillars, on each of which a rampant marble lion did ceaseless sentinel duty.

Mr. Steelson and Bill paused for a moment before the imposing entrance. It was late in the afternoon following the arrival of the troupe in Bostwick, and the star and his manager had come to pay their respects to Mr. Ranston. Mr. Steelson, who had visited the author on former engagements in Bostwick, was prepared for the luxurious display that confronted them. Bill, on his maiden pilgrimage to the sacred Ranston precincts, could not restrain his wonderment.

"I 'll bet Shakespeare could n't boast of a joint like this!" he exclaimed.

"Shakespeare was not a boaster in any sense," was his companion's mild reproof. "Ah, there 's Ranston on the piazza. Let us go in."

The composer of sixty plays was seated in a very serious attitude in a very light wicker rocker. He was not alone. At his right were his wife and his wife's mother, neither of whom apparently shared his serious tendency. Judging by external evidence, these ladies were engaged in a continuous smiling contest. When not smiling at each other, it was their custom to smile at anybody within range. Upon the appearance, therefore, of the two visitors, they turned their batteries on them, maintaining a perfect fusillade of smiles as they came up the white gravel walk.

Mr. Ranston, whose seriousness increased with the approach of the men, rose to greet them. His rising was not performed in a single movement. That would have been inconsistent with his extreme dignity and his extreme height of six feet and six inches. He arose, as it were, on the instalment plan, and when the various sections of his figure were at last in a perpendicular position he held his hand out to the star and said, with no vestige of pleasure on his weasel face:

"I 'm pleased to see you, Steelson, pleased to see you."

The star cordially exchanged salutations with the family group and introduced his manager.

"I 'm pleased to meet you, Truetell, pleased to

"'I'm Pleased to See You, Pleased to See You'"

meet you," and the writer scowled malignantly at the manager.

"He 's a joy slayer, all right," thought Bill. "Won-

der how he 'd act if we came while he was having dinner. He looks like a stingy employer on pay day."

"I sha'n't ask you to sit down here, Steelson," said this genial host. "You come into my den and we 'll talk shop. Truetell will be safe with the ladies until we return. Take my seat, Truetell."

The star accepted the invitation, and Bill, taking the light wicker rocker, soon found himself *hors de combat* with the smiling ladies. Conversation did not begin immediately. Mrs. Ranston and her mother, discovering in Bill a splendid target for their facial manifestations, took every possible advantage of the opportunity. Past mistresses of the art of smiling, they levelled at him such a variety of winning expressions that the manager gallantly believed it to be his duty to reciprocate. He accordingly twisted his features into a succession of weird grins and grimaces intended to denote boundless delight.

The merry battle of smiles went on between them until Bill, fearing his face might never resume its original shape, yielded the palm to his fair hostesses and started to talk.

"This is a very nice place you have here."

"Yes, it 's pretty nice now," Mrs. Ranston replied in an animated manner; "but I intend to make several improvements — just as soon as mother dies. For one thing, I 'm going to have the piazza altered. It

is n't wide enough, and the steps leading to the lawn should be more gradual.

"I don't want to muss up things now and disturb dear mother," continued Mrs. Ranston, fondly patting her parent's aged cheek, "but work will begin at once — just as soon as she dies."

If Mrs. Ranston had been discussing the probability of her mother's taking a holiday trip to Europe she could not have alluded to the event in a more cheerful strain. She looked with tender affection at the elder lady, who, on her part, appeared duly grateful for Mrs. Ranston's considerate delay in the contemplated improvements. The mother affectionately returned the caresses, and though she spoke no word of thanks, there was pathetic eloquence in the maternal pride that beamed from her kindly old face.

"The walls of the house need freshening, too," Mrs. Ranston cheerily resumed, "and the painters will start work — just as soon as mother dies. Mother does n't like the smell of paint, and I would n't have her annoyed for worlds — while she lives. Don't you think I 'm right, Mr. Truetell?"

Mr. Truetell's truthful opinion of Mrs. Ranston would have furnished her with food for a long period of serious reflection. He was wondering what complimentary form his answer should take, when he heard a familiar voice raised loudly and angrily inside the residence. Making a hurried excuse to the ladies, Bill

entered the house, and following the sound of the voice, he quickly reached the den in an upper story. There he discovered the playwright in a defiant attitude in the centre of the room gesticulating in his wildest manner, declaiming in his shrillest pitch, and towering in his rage so much above his usual height, that his head and the ceiling seemed to be in imminent danger of coming into contact. Mr. Steelson, standing quietly a few feet distant, was evidently regarding the author's display of passion from a comedy point of view. Both men were facing a picture suspended from the opposite wall.

It was a large sketch in black and white representing two valiant gentlemen engaged in a duel and fighting with long pens instead of swords. One of the contestants bore a strong likeness to Elton Ranston. The other was patterned after the accepted portrait of William Shakespeare. The contest was spirited, though the advantage appeared altogether on the side of the pride of Bostwick.

Underneath the picture was this suggestive inscription:

"RANSTON AND SHAKESPEARE ENGAGED IN A FRIENDLY TILT FOR IMMORTALITY"

"What 's the trouble?" Bill anxiously inquired.

The star pointed to the sketch on the wall. "He does n't want me to laugh at that joke."

"Joke!" shouted the playwright, in another burst of indignation. "You are going too far!"

Mr. Steelson persisted. "Why, certainly it 's a joke. But I 'll leave the question to a third person's judgment. Is n't it a joke, Truetell?"

"Gentlemen," pleaded Bill, "please don't put it up to me."

The wrath of Ranston showed no signs of abating. "You always had a strange way of looking at things, Steelson," he complained with bitterness.

"Such things as that," retorted the actor, pointing to the picture, "would distort anybody's vision. Whose idea was it, anyway?"

"My own," was the playwright's proud reply. "The artist on the Bostwick 'Leader' made the sketch for an engraving on my letter-heads."

"Let me have one," requested the star.

"For what purpose?"

"I want to send it to some funny paper."

"Steelson, you will make me forget that this is my house."

The star laughed heartily. "Don't use that stock phrase, Ranston. Keep it for your next melodrama."

The infuriated author took a step nearer the star, and the affair might have assumed a really belligerent aspect if Bill had not decided it was time for him to intervene and play the role of peacemaker. He assured

the aggrieved Ranston that their purpose in visiting him was not to incite a quarrel, but to invite him personally to attend the performance that night at the theatre. This assurance and the invitation had a quieting effect, and when the diplomatic manager produced the tickets for a stage box and handed them to the playwright, all his resentment vanished.

"What do you give them to-night, Steelson?" he asked.

"I shall give them the Dane."

The spirit of dramatic rivalry made answer from its permanent lodgment in Ranston's breast:

"Well, there are some good things in 'Hamlet,' but I can prove to you that Shakespeare was all wrong in the basic construction of the play. He did n't —"

"You can't prove it now, Ranston," broke in the star good-naturedly, "for we must hurry away to get ready for to-night's performance. Please excuse us."

They shook hands with the great man and left his house, after pausing for a moment on the piazza to pay their parting compliments to the two ladies, whose faces were still wreathed and festooned in smiles.

On the road to the hotel the star grew more and more serious as he contemplated the task on hand for that evening.

"The first performance of the Dane this season and Ranston in front. To-night 's the night," he gravely said.

"To-night 's the night," the manager echoed, though his anticipations did not concern themselves at that moment with either the initial representation of the play or the critical Ranston. Bill was wondering how the little Van Balken, attired in skirtless costume, would make her first Shakespearian plunge.

CHAPTER XVII

DOING THE DANE

WHEN the grave Mr. Ranston and his sunshiny kinswomen arrived at the theatre that evening, the members of the orchestra, following a time-honored country custom, were religiously employed in extracting from their instruments a nerve-racking selection of squawking and decidedly irreligious sounds preparatory to the regular overture. The playwright imperiously waved the two ladies to chairs in the rear of the private box, and seated himself directly in front of them. Thus, practically alone and with an unhampered view of the stage, he prepared himself to deal fairly with the merits or demerits of "Hamlet" as they presented themselves to his expert attention. His preliminary attitude toward the author of the play was hardly that of a rival playwright. He appeared to be animated with a feeling of friendly condescension. Before the curtain went up he deliberately turned to the audience with an expression on his face that seemed to say: "I do not bear any personal grudge against this man Shakespeare. I am here to see his play in the same cordial spirit in which

I would expect him to witness one of mine if he had not died several centuries before my coming. I hope he will merit your applause. Treat him kindly for my sake."

The curtain not rising at the appointed time, Bill left his post at the door of the theatre and went behind the scenes, where he beheld the usual confusion and disorder incidental to first-night performances.

Stage hands were rushing hither and thither bearing sections of faded, patchy canvas, soon to take definite form and be revealed as the solid, palatial domicile of King Claudius to the people before the curtain, who would accept the revelation in good faith, provided there was no limit to their powers of imagination. Property-men were dashing on the stage with ornaments and articles of furniture, presumably very ancient and very Danish, but really very modern and very Bostwickian. Intermingling with the busy crew of workmen, with apparently no purpose save to get in their way and impede the progress of their labors, the artists stalked about, habited in the finery of the court of Denmark.

Behind a wall of Elsinore Castle, Bill saw a young actor pacing nervously up and down while he repeated his lines. He wore a tightly fitting costume of scarlet and gold, and a hat jauntily set on his curly wig. There was a combination of impudence and demureness about the youth that attracted the manager. He paused, and the second glance disclosed the identity

of the little Van Balken. The sight of her drove from his mind every feeling of jealousy for the juvenile man, leaving only sincere admiration unalloyed. The girl's slender proportions lent themselves appropriately to the role of the youthful male courtier, but her daintily feminine lines remained symmetrically in evidence to add charm and beauty to the picture. Unconscious of Bill's approach, she continued her graceful strides back and forth until he was near enough to hear her say:

"The carriages, sir, are the hangers. The carriages, sir, are the hangers. The carriages, sir, are the hangers."

When she saw the manager she stepped back in pretty confusion, seeking the close shelter of the wall.

"I say, kid, you 're a dream!" was Bill's candid declaration.

The new "Osric" drew her mantle closely around her and timidly shrank from his admiring scrutiny. Under the rouge her cheeks reddened with blushes.

"Oh, please, please, don't look at me, Mr. Truetell. I — I never — wore it — them before. I did n't think I could be so nervous. Honest, I feel like crying."

Bill tried his best to reassure her. "Cheer up, kid! You 'll be all right. I knew a girl once who bawled like a baby the first time she put on tights, but she grew to like them so much she cried just as hard when she had to give them up. You 're going to make a hit tonight!"

"She Stepped Back in Pretty Confusion, Seeking the Close Shelter of the Wall"

"No, I won't, Mr. Truetell. Skakespeare 's no song and dance. I 'll go up in my lines, I 'm sure I will."

She shook her head dolefully and muttered in a mechanical tone:

"The wagons, sir, are the hangers."

"There!" she cried in a burst of anguish. "I said 'wagons' instead of 'carriages.' What will I do? What will I do?"

"Say whichever you like," encouraged Bill. "Nobody 'll notice it."

"Oh, yes, they will. I said 'wagons' at rehearsal to-day, and the stage manager was mad clean through. He told me to keep repeating the line to-night before I went on so as to have it right, and here I am saying 'wagons.' I know I 'll say 'wagons' in the play."

The little Shakespearian novice could no longer hold back the tears.

"Don't cry, kid. You hand them 'wagons' if you feel like it, and if Pillsbury makes any kick, refer him to me." Bill's breast perceptibly swelled in expectation of resuming the office of the girl's protector. "What 's he making so much fuss about a single word for? Does n't he know that wagons and carriages are about the same thing?"

The actress sobbed. "He says — if I — if I — say — 'wagons' to-night I 'll — queer — queer the whole show."

"He 's crazy. Forget him!" commanded Bill emphatically. In his softest, kindliest tones he added, "Please don't cry any more. I don't like to see you cry. I —"

A loud order, "Clear the stage!" abruptly ended the little scene behind the wall of Elsinore Castle. Actors, stage hands, and property-men precipitately fled to the wings. Mr. Steelson, dressed in the sombre raiment of Hamlet, remained alone in the centre of the stage for a final survey. Glancing critically at the royal residence, he noted that it inclined too much to the right and called out:

"Move that castle wall more to left centre."

A stage hand carelessly picked up the castle wall and gave it a gentle shove to the desired position.

"Those battlements and towers must come down stage at least two feet," was his next order.

The battlements and towers, propelled by a couple of workmen, obeyed the command.

"Is the Ghost ready?"

"Here!" came Smolton's sepulchral voice from the left upper entrance.

"Not quite so much moon, electrician!"

The supply of moonlight was straightway diminished.

"All right. Signal the curtain."

The star strutted from the stage. Pillsbury, stationed in the "prompt" entrance, pressed the electric

button communicating with the waiting attendant in the fly-gallery, and the curtain immediately arose on the first act of the tragedy.

Gloomily but grandly the majestic current of the masterpiece swept along until the immortal soliloquy scene was begun. Mr. Steelson and his company were scoring an unqualified triumph. Although the spectators had never before seen a performance of "Hamlet" the vital chords it struck met a ready response, and applause was frequent and enthusiastic.

Mr. Ranston, in his seat of judgment in the stage box, had found little to condemn in the work of his brother dramatist. On several occasions, when the actors uttered certain memorable lines which for ages have symbolized the most perfect crystallizations of thought and philosophy, he deigned to nod his head approvingly. As the opening sentences of the soliloquy were delivered, he leaned forward in his chair, clasped his hands under his chin, and murmured to himself, "Even I could do no better work than this."

On the other side of the footlights the star was eclipsing all his previous histrionic efforts. During his long experience as an exponent of the "legitimate" he had personified Hamlet in hundreds of performances, and every time it had been a labor of love. Like other stars who have essayed the Dane, Mr. Steelson was sensible of a strong bond of sympathy between the unhappy prince and himself.

Perhaps the underlying reason why this tragic hero appeals so forcefully to the average actor is based on the characteristics they have in common: the varying moods, the petulancy, the fits of melancholy, the irresolution, and the flashes of insanity. Some impersonators of Hamlet might be loath to admit this similitude. Mr. Steelson not only frankly confessed it, but went several steps further.

"I can play Hamlet," he was wont to say, "because I am Hamlet."

In his performance in Bostwick the commingling of his own nature with Hamlet's seemed a more natural process than ever before. The player wept at Hamlet's griefs, and through a strange psychological transition he could feel the soul of Hamlet sympathizing with his own misfortunes.

"To be or not to be: that is the question:
Whether 't is nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them."

Into every line, into every word, this evening Steelson threw all the fervor of his being. What "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" had he not endured! How often had he been tempted to lay down the burden of his life forever, restrained only by a nobler mental instinct that persuaded him to suffer on in silence!

"To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to; 't is a consummation
Devoutly to be wished."

Again, his own feelings, his own thoughts! Who could not act under the inspiration of such sentiments, the outpourings of his own soul! Never in his life had he felt the wondrous hypnotic spell of Shakespeare so vividly as to-night. Steelson the actor was no more. Hamlet the Dane had come to earth again for the edification of the theatre-goers of Bostwick. Small wonder they sat like people entranced!

"To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there 's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause."

In the contemplation of the awful dreams that may follow mortal dissolution the actor shut his eyes. On opening them he beheld a sight as chilling to his sensibilities as any post-mortem apparition could possibly be. A big black cat had walked on the stage, and was looking up inquiringly into the startled face of the Prince of Denmark.

CHAPTER XVIII

PUSSY AND THE PRINCE

THE author of the saw, "A cat may look on a king," would have received an instructive object lesson from his own proverb could he have viewed the situation on the stage of the Bostwick theatre. He would have learned that a cat, assuming her right to raise her eyes to a king, may stare a mere prince out of countenance, if she feels so inclined. The feline now confronting Hamlet was evidently cognizant of her prerogative regarding persons of kingly origin, for her inspection of the Dane's noble features was searching and long continued, as she stood at the respectful distance of a yard from him, purring her satisfaction at being in the royal presence.

Mr. Steelson was absolutely petrified in the tragic attitude he had struck just prior to pussy's entrance. When he had closed his eyes to conjure up ghastly death-dreams his head was thrown well back and his arms stretched to their full length straight before him, with fingers rigid and palms upturned,— the entire posture suggesting the thrilling expectancy of a person waiting for something dreadful to appear. As his

eyelids slowly parted and he realized that something dreadful had put in an appearance, he did not move a muscle of face or body. True, he felt a maddening

"MR. STEELSON WAS PETRIFIED IN THE TRAGIC ATTITUDE HE HAD STRUCK"

inclination to establish a connection between his sleek black visitor and the pointed toe of his princely slipper, but his calmer judgment warned him that such a

procedure would be extremely undignified for a Danish prince, and not less than fatal to the performance.

Strange to say, the spectators were not disposed to take a humorous view of the singular scene. They sat with solemn faces, accepting the cat as a regular member of the cast, introduced to illustrate a spooky emanation from Hamlet's disordered imagination. They regarded the animal with the same fearsome awe that the ghost of Hamlet's father had inspired in them on his entrance in the earlier scene.

Instinctively the victim of pussy's intrusion knew this fortunate disposition on the part of the audience, but his instinct also cautioned him its illusion could not last long, and he breathed a fervent prayer that the cat might be content with her examination of himself and leave the stage when it was finished.

His prayer was not answered. After completing her inspection of the prince she turned her attention to the articles of furniture in the royal apartment, running about with perfect self-confidence and freedom of movement and never an indication of stage-fright.

The members of the orchestra, who had been playing slow music for the soliloquy, stopped in consternation when the cat entered and took the centre of the stage; but a quick glance darting from Hamlet's eye to the leader's warned him that the situation must be saved at any cost, and the sad strains were resumed.

The leader's baton now came in for its share in

pussy's diversions. It was evident that she imagined the gentleman directing the musicians was waving his polished stick solely to amuse her, for she capered friskily while she followed the movements of the wand from side to side.

It was a period of purgatory for Mr. Steelson, but he maintained his original attitude heroically, his head thrown back and arms extended as he continued the delivery of the soliloquy.

"If I relax for a second," he thought, "I 'll lose my grip on the audience. My God, what a situation for an artist like me!"

His mental torture was indescribable. He did not dare to look at the cat again. He must be supremely indifferent to her presence. Furthermore, he knew that by this time the spectators, even with their limited Bostwickian intelligences, must be aware that the actions of the tabby did not constitute part of the original play as Shakespeare wrote it, and he grew painfully conscious that they were watching him intently to see how he was bearing the terrible strain. If he gave the slightest sign of his concern in the presence of the cat the people in front would instantly lose their sympathetic interest in him and the tragedy transform itself into a howling farce. It was a thrilling contest between the actor and the cat for first place in the hearts of the audience, with the odds thus far in favor of Mr. Steelson.

Tiring of chasing the elusive baton, the star's feline Nemesis scampered along the row of footlights, paused a moment before the Ranstons' box, and then, leaping lightly on the rail, calmly sized up the occupants one by one.

In justice to the Bard of Bostwick, it must be said that he did not yield to the temptation to take any mean advantage over the Bard of Avon that the cat's proximity offered him. He knew the bond with which the star had been holding the audience was weakened to a thread so slender it must snap the instant he made any demonstration for or against the tantalizing animal perched within reach of his arm. The fate of the soliloquy scene and possibly the rest of his rival's play lay in his power. A man of lesser mould might have surrendered to the temptation, but Mr. Ranston grandly resisted, and Mr. Shakespeare was immune for the evening as far as his fellow-dramatist was concerned.

Absolutely ignoring the cat, therefore, the great modern author remained in position, his hands clasped under his chin, fixedly regarding the illustrious scion of the house of Denmark who was still rendering the transcendent soliloquy quite as bravely and just as conscientiously as though there were no cats in existence anywhere in the world, least of all on the stage of the Bostwick theatre. Pussy was displeased at her reception in the Ranston box, and evidenced her

displeasure by turning tail and trotting across the stage to the box on the opposite side.

At this critical juncture Bill Truetell, who had been a breathless spectator of the cat's escapades from a seat in the rear of the theatre, acted on an impulse to go to the rescue of his star and be the hero of the evening. The sufferings he had been enduring were not a whit less poignant than Mr. Steelson's. The awful suspense had studded his seamy brow with beads of perspiration. His hands were cold with extreme nervousness and his heart had almost ceased to beat. When he saw the cat for the first time, he was possessed with a desire to rush behind the scenes and kick pussy off the stage and into the next world, but he knew this murderous feat would only make matters worse. Alas! he felt powerless to help, and yet he must think of something to do! Meanwhile the grim fascination of the spectacle held him to his seat.

When the cat left the Ranstons to seek a more genial greeting in the opposite box, a solution of the feline problem came to Bill's mind. Why had he not thought before of his little ruse that had worked so effectively with the station agent's pet in the ticket office in Branton? It was the thing to do, and it must be done at once!

In less than a minute after he had formed his resolve Bill was kneeling on the stage behind one of the

wings, scraping the floor with his cane. Pussy straightway pricked up her ears and ran toward the sound.

"I 've got her," was Bill's joyous thought. The cat paused almost within his reach.

"Just a little nearer, good pussy," coaxed Bill.

Pussy twisted her head and listened to the scraping noise as if trying to decide whether a rat was really in the vicinity. Her decision was in the negative and she turned to run away. Bill, stretching out frantically to catch the escaping tabby, lost his balance and fell over on the stage in full view of the audience.

Instantly there were shrieks of laughter from all parts of the theatre. The uproar continued, showing no sign of cessation until Hamlet ordered the curtain to be rung down on his misfortunes.

The unhappy Dane sank helplessly on a chair and shook his head disconsolately. Bill, shamefaced and humiliated, went up to him and contritely said:

"I 'm so sorry, governor."

Mr. Steelson's eyes blazed wrathfully at his manager.

"Don't be sore on me, governor," entreated Bill. "I did n't intend to do that fall. On the level, I did n't."

Bill's extremely repentant, almost tearful, expression awoke the actor at last to a realization of the humor of it all.

Straightening himself up he said: "Truetell, take

my advice and never try again to enter the acting end of the profession. Your sphere is in the front of the house. The spectators stood for the cat, but when you made that inartistic entrance it was all off. I could hold them no longer. Now, boys," turning to the stage hands, "clear for the next scene, and in the meantime somebody please oblige me by killing that cat."

Unfortunately his sanguinary request could not be executed. In the excitement following Bill's precipitate appearance pussy vanished from sight, carrying with her a favorable impression of her experience in the "legitimate" and a determination to re-enter the field at the first opportunity.

The audience, quickly recovering its equanimity after the cat episode, entered into the true tragic spirit of the ensuing scenes and bestowed liberal applause on the actors.

Among those who met with favor was the little Van Balken, who made an undoubted hit in her Shakespearian debut, reciting Osric's speeches with all the necessary sprightliness, and without a single mistake.

Bill was waiting for her in the wings when she came off after her first scene. He congratulated her with, "I 'm proud of you. You 're the real classical goods."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Truetell. Was I all right in my lines?"

Bill's eyes squinted with humorous satisfaction at her delicately rounded figure.

"Your lines are perfect, kid."

Her blushes showed through her grease paint.

"You know what I mean, Mr. Truetell. Did I make good?"

"Make good!" repeated Bill. "Ophelia for yours next season."

The play drew near its climax. Hamlet had received his fatal wound from the envenomed sword of Laërtes and was preparing to die after the most approved histrionic fashion within the arms of the faithful Horatio.

Mr. Steelson, who had always prided himself on his death performances, determined this night to break all dissolution records by dying so realistically that the memory of that unspeakable horror in the soliloquy scene would be forever blotted from the minds of the spectators.

Assisted by Horatio, he had sunk with perfect naturalness to a recumbent position. His lower limbs gradually stiffened as he simulated the rigor of death creeping over them. He clutched his throat convulsively like a man choking for want of air, rolled his eyes until the whites alone were visible, heaved a prolonged expiring sigh, and breathed what was scheduled to be Hamlet's last breath.

"Good-night, sweet prince," quoth Horatio, "and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

In lieu of flights of angels, one black cat, the heroine

of the soliloquy scene, tripped nimbly on the stage and stood at the feet of the dead Dane.

The audience greeted the reappearance of pussy with storms of laughter.

"What 's the matter now?" groaned Hamlet, fearing to open his eyes.

Horatio hoarsely whispered, "It 's that damned cat again. Hold on. You can't get up. You 're dead."

"I wish I was. For God's sake ring down the curtain."

The signal was given, but the curtain man in the fly-gallery had deserted his place to investigate the cause of the uproar in the audience; consequently the combination of the defunct Hamlet, the sympathetic Horatio, and the irrepressible cat still remained an interesting exhibition.

"Is the curtain coming down?" gasped Mr. Steelson.

"Not yet."

"Then I 'm going to get up."

Resisting Horatio's efforts to prevent him from coming back to life, the erstwhile dead Dane struggled to his feet and launched at the cat a mighty kick which, had it landed, would have sent the aspiring feline sailing to the top gallery. It did not land. Pussy skipped playfully toward the wings, the revivified Hamlet in hot pursuit; and this was the final scene in the tragedy which the spectators beheld before the curtain man returned to his post and performed his duty.

CHAPTER XIX

THE MIGHTY FALLEN

THERE is a histrionic superstition that the appearance of a cat on a stage during a performance is a sure sign of good luck for the company the rest of the season. Unfortunately, superstitions, as well as rules, have their exceptions. The animal that upset the performance of "Hamlet" succeeded also in upsetting the superstition in its relation to the Steelson tour, for nothing but bad luck followed the engagement in Bostwick. The organization journeyed through several States in the Middle West without discovering among the inhabitants any noticeable symptoms of an appetite for classical repertoire as served by Mr. Steelson.

One of Bill's managerial duties was to present to the star every evening a copy of the box-office statements compiled by the treasurer of the theatre, showing the number of seats sold for the performance and the amount of the receipts. The presentation was made regularly between the second and third acts in Mr. Steelson's dressing-room.

This particular evening, before entering, the manager rapped deferentially on the door.

Mr. Steelson cheerily called out, "Come in."

Bill appeared, bearing the memorandum of the company's daily financial fate.

"Ah, Truetell!" was the star's warm greeting. "How is it to-night?"

"Not so good, governor."

"Never mind, Truetell. Better luck to-morrow," was the star's encouraging rejoinder.

On the following evening the receipts were even more disheartening.

To the inquiry, "How is it to-night?" Bill made answer, "It 's fierce."

The star took the statement, glanced at the paltry sum indicated, and again showed his pluck by saying, "Never mind, Truetell. Better luck to-morrow night."

The town of Drenham, the next stop in the troupe's itinerary, paid tribute to Shakespeare to the extent of just seventeen dollars and twenty-five cents.

"Looks pretty scant in front to-night, Truetell. How much is it?"

Mr. Steelson, made up as King Lear, was sitting at his dressing-table, stroking his long white beard, when the manager paid his nightly visit.

"I hate to tell you the receipts, governor. See for yourself."

He handed the actor the fatal slip of paper. The ridiculously small total caused Mr. Steelson to pull

his kingly whisker with such vigor that it parted from its fastening.

Holding the miserable statement of receipts in one hand and the dislodged beard in the other, he exclaimed:

"Truetell, there must be some mistake. I counted twice as many people as that when I was on in the last scene."

Bill explained, "There 's a lot of lithograph passes, but not a cent more in real money."

"Then what can be the matter? Don't they know Shakespeare here?"

"It 's my belief," said Bill, with deep earnestness, "they never even heard of Shakespeare in this section. We 're up against it good, hard, and plenty. I 'm not a quitter, Mr. Steelson. I 've carried along shows on conversation before, but my advice in this case is to close up shop the end of this week."

"And go back to New York?" the star pathetically asked.

"Yes, get back while we 've got the price," urged Bill. "I can manipulate somehow to scrape the fares together this week. If we wait till next week there 'll be nothing doing."

Mr. Steelson was a patient auditor of this dark forecast. When the manager finished, the star took a brush from a mucilage pot on his table and slowly applied it to the edges of the King Lear beard. Facing the mirror

he carefully affixed the snowy appendage in its proper position. Then he rose proudly to his full height, drew his royal robes about him, and turned to his associate.

"Truetell," he said in subdued but impressive tones, "you may return to New York whenever you like. I 'm going to stick to Shakespeare."

His noble determination sent a responsive thrill through Bill's sympathetic heart.

"If you stick," he cried, "I 'm with you!"

The star was visibly touched by this honest expression of loyalty. He flung his arm about his manager's shoulders and held it there as they left the dressing-room in response to the call for the next act. The display of affection was duly appreciated by Bill, who stood in the wings while the star strode on the stage; and he listened in admiration to his rendition of King Lear's priceless speeches before an audience representing a sum total of less than eighteen dollars!

No appreciable increase of interest in the classic drama revealing itself in the towns following Drenham, the financial status of the Steelson company quickly reached a stage of hopeless insolvency. Every day new obligations sprang into existence, while old ones grew larger. Salaries no longer existed save in the memory of the artists.

The present conditions were so bad and the prospects so much worse that several members unceremoniously left the troupe. Even their fealty to Shakespeare

could not stand so severe a test. Finally, only ten survivors remained, the courageous roster including Mr. Steelson; Bill; Miss Wentworth; her daughter Maud; her husband, the "character" man; Smolton, the "heavy" man; Henley, the comedian; Dodd, the "juvenile" man; Mrs. Jameson; and the little Van Balken.

How the star succeeded in presenting the pieces in his repertoire with only nine players is still a marvel of stage history. His announced aversion to one actor impersonating two characters that were required to be on the stage at the same time, was quickly overcome by the necessity that knows no law, dramatic or otherwise. Necessity also taught him that Shakespeare himself must be sacrificed in certain circumstances, and he employed the sacrificial knife in cutting out certain scenes and paring down others to meet the exigencies of his abbreviated company, which, with the aid of the same convenient weapon, he spread over a great variety of parts, the last operation being not unlike the covering of a large slice of bread with a limited supply of butter.

Public criticism of these high-handed amputations and condensations was discounted by the fact that the public remained away from the performances, which, nevertheless, were given with as much conscientiousness as if every theatre visited was packed to the doors.

When one desertion from the Steelson ranks had fol-

lowed another, the star never faltered in his resolution to press onward. If every one of his company left him, he declared, he should still be true to his classical colors, even to presenting the various plays in monologue form. He was, however, in no immediate danger of being forced to embody a whole cast in himself, for the eight players still remaining with him had all proclaimed their loyalty to the death.

Small as the company was, its manager daily added to his stock of gray hairs in worrying efforts to keep it alive and moving. Through some unaccountable cause a penurious reputation invariably preceded the troupe, rendering it impossible for Bill to utilize his expert powers of persuasion on hotel landlords or railroad agents. "Cash in advance," was the motto confronting him wherever he turned. Frequently, when denied credit in hotels, he was compelled to lodge the artists in cheap boarding places, in farm-houses, or wherever an unwary householder was willing to take a risk.

How to keep the company supplied with even the bare necessities of life was the question now facing its executive head. All luxuries were put on the tabooed list. The little luncheon after the performance passed into history. During the day the meals did not always appear with clock-like regularity, and when they did materialize they were of the plainest, sometimes the coarsest, description.

The severe diet and the occasional absence of it,

combined with other privations, rapidly left their imprint on the men and women in the unfortunate troupe, all of whom became thin and haggard, with the notable exception of Mrs. Jameson, who had more flesh to spare than any other two members of the company.

Almost as serious a question as the keeping together of the bodies and souls of the Steelson artists was the problem of transporting them from town to town. Railroad officials invariably insisted on money down before the delivery of tickets. When the required amount was non-existent, what was the magic practised to call the needed cash into being? On such crucial occasions every known process, save stealing, was employed to secure the needed financial assistance. The watches of the star and manager soon went to that bourne from whence few watches return. They were followed by jewelled pieces of costumes and valuable stage weapons, treasured by the star for so many years that they cost him a genuine heart pang at parting.

Several times, when it was utterly impossible to pay for the transportation over the regular railroad, the company was saved from stranding by the intervention of a friendly trolley line, which carried the artists to the next town for a sum within the limits of the managerial exchequer.

After one of these life-saving interurban rides, costing Bill fifty cents for the entire organization, the town

of Bassett was reached early in the afternoon of a cold November day.

Although three silver quarters in his trousers pocket represented the extent of the treasury, the manager determined to obtain accommodations at the hotel, a full half-hour's walk from the station. The shivering players huddled about the office stove, while Bill, stepping briskly to the desk, picked up a pen and started with a flourish to inscribe the title of the company on the register.

"Just a minute, please," said the clerk. "My orders are to get a cash deposit of half the amount of the bill."

"Nonsense," laughed Bill. "You don't know who we are."

He jingled the quarters in his pocket to add emphasis to his financial stability.

"Yes, I do. That 's just the trouble," replied the clerk.

Bill, assuming an air of assurance, said, "Oh, all right, I 'll straighten this out in a minute."

Drawing one of the silver pieces from his pocket he tossed it on the desk.

"I suppose you 'll let me use your telephone if I pay you the full charge in advance, won't you?"

The clerk made change for the call and Bill rang up the theatre.

"Hello, old man," was his cheery greeting. "This

is Truetell, manager of the Steelson Company. How 's the advance sale?"

"Pretty bad," was the discouraging response over the wire.

"How bad?"

"The worst ever."

"You mean there 's no sale at all?"

"You could n't find a sale with a search-warrant."

"What are the prospects of a window sale to-night?"

"Nothing in sight."

Bill, still holding the receiver to his ear, turned his disappointed face to Mr. Steelson, who had come to his side during the conversation.

"You need n't tell me. I know," said the star with dismal significance.

"Look here," resumed Bill over the 'phone. "The hotel insists on a cash deposit, and I can't quite make up the amount. I want you to furnish the difference till after the count up. Only a few dollars."

"Don't make me laugh, Truetell."

Bill looked sorrowfully at the star. The two companions in distress exchanged gloomy headshakes.

Once more addressing himself to the unsympathetic manager at the other end of the wire, Bill said:

"Very well. The laugh 's on me. Sorry to trouble you further, but can you recommend a boarding-house where they don't want money down?"

"There is n't a single boarding-house in Bassett."

"That 's cheerful news. Don't you know of any place where we can put up, outside of the village green?"

"You might try Perry's."

"Who 's Perry?"

"A farmer about three miles from the hotel. He 's a queer old skinflint, but he might take you in if you happen to strike him right."

"Thank you very much." Bill restored the telephone receiver to its hook.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said to the company, "our old friend Perry invites us to be his guests to-night. I don't like the looks of this hotel, anyway."

The ladies and gentlemen wearily picked up their belongings, turned their backs reluctantly on the office stove, and started to walk down the country road, following in the wake of Bill and Mr. Steelson. As the afternoon wore on the cold increased, adding to their discomfort.

Bassett had not attained the sidewalk stage of town development. The way was so rough and stony and worn into so many deep ruts that the sensitive feet of the artists suffered much before the journey of a full hour and a half was accomplished. "Perry's," to which a passing farmer's boy directed them, loomed up in the distance as a welcoming haven of refuge to the unfortunate company, every one of whom by this time was almost dropping from fatigue, chilled to the

marrow, and nearly famished for want of the food they had not tasted since breakfast.

The troupe drew up in front of an old gate that creaked ominously on its rusty hinges as Bill swung it open. A path led to a two-story farm-house, at least a century old and wofully in need of repair. Beyond the house and a little to the right was a barn so newly built that its fresh, unpainted walls glistened in the November sunshine, presenting a striking contrast to the dingy exterior of the ancient domicile.

Having appointed himself envoy extraordinary, the manager, leaving the company at the gate, walked up to the house and applied himself to the old-fashioned knocker. The door was opened by a curiously sharp-faced, dried-up, elderly personage wearing a battered straw hat, a gray flannel shirt, and faded blue jeans which disappeared in the tops of high, unpolished boots. A bunch of white bristles protruded threateningly from his chin, which went up and down in tobacco-masticating motions as its owner stared coldly at his visitor.

"Beg pardon," said Bill, summoning all his politeness to his aid, "this is Mr. Perry, I believe?"

The possessor of the bristles ceased his facial contortions only long enough to emit a grunt, which Bill interpreted as an answer in the affirmative.

"My name 's Truetell, manager of the Rupert Steelson Dramatic Company. I 'd like to arrange with you for board and lodging for the night."

The farmer emitted another grunt. This time it baffled Bill's power of interpretation.

He accordingly repeated his announcement, and the farmer repeated the grunt with exactly the same intonation as before.

Remembering that deafness is sometimes a characteristic of elderly tillers of the soil, Bill voiced his statement in a much louder key.

"I ain't deef."

The farmer snapped his words like a whip-lash as his ferret eyes glared piercingly at Bill, who apologized humbly and awaited further developments.

"Got any money?" demanded the crusty old agriculturist.

"You 'll be paid in the morning. We 're playing at the opera house to-night. Let me invite you and your family to see the show."

Bill took a pass from his pocket and offered it to the old man, who recoiled from it as from a poisoned dagger.

"We dun't go to see show-folks act. We 're good Meth'dists."

The manager pocketed his pass with his pride, and humbly renewed his request for accommodations.

The answer he received was icy and inflexible. "'T ain't any use 'thout money."

He turned and re-entered his house. The situation had become desperate. Bill followed the farmer down

the hallway, pouring forth an eloquent volley of arguments in behalf of his associates. The old man hesitated, retraced a step or two, and looked through the open door at the shivering players as they aligned themselves in front of the gate, patiently awaiting the result of the manager's parley.

"Be them the troupe?" he asked.

Hope sprang at once to possession of Bill's soul. He quickly answered, "Yes, Mr. Perry, that 's the company. Come out and meet them."

"Dun't want to meet 'em," snarled the farmer, "but I 'll look 'em over."

He slouched half-way down the walk, took a critical position with his hands on his hips, and surveyed the company with the air of a cattle buyer.

The inspection finished, he turned to Bill and asked, "Kin the men folks work?"

"Work?" said Bill. "Why, they 're artists!"

"Well, if they be artists," continued the farmer, "that 's jest the thing. They kin paint the barn yonder, and I 'll tek a chance and trest ye fer yer lodgins and victuals."

The manager hastened to explain, "But they're not that kind of artists. They don't paint."

"Pooh!" sneered Perry. "Anybody kin paint that 's got the stren'th. I cal'late ye dun't want to make a bargain. Good-day, Mr. Trouper."

He started up the walk to the house.

"Wait a minute," cried Bill, "and I 'll talk it over with them."

Joining the company, he held an earnest consultation with its male members. The proposition to transform themselves, even temporarily, into ordinary workmen was a sore blow to their artistic natures, and met with general disapproval.

"I may be a barn-stormer," declared the character man, "but a barn-painter — never!"

Henley, the comedian, made a wholly unsuccessful effort to smile, as he said sarcastically, "It 's a joke."

Smolton was true to his villanous stage instincts. He savagely hissed his indignation at the insult, and was in favor of killing the farmer for daring to propose such a thing. His sentiments were heartily indorsed by Dodd, who, bristling up, slapped him on the shoulder and said, "I 'm with you, old man."

The star remained silent during these outbursts — sadly but eloquently silent. He felt the weight of the degrading suggestion much more keenly and much more deeply than his associates, but he gave his thoughts no utterance. Standing with bowed head and arms folded, an expression of profound melancholy overspread his face.

"What do you say, Mr. Steelson?" asked Bill.

The star roused himself with an effort, and responded gravely, "You know our necessities even better than I, Truetell. What do you say?"

"This is what I say," Bill answered, speaking to the actors collectively. "I sympathize with you all, gentlemen, but we must consider the ladies. If we don't tackle this job they 'll suffer more than we. This is the only place in town where there 's a living chance for them to eat and sleep to-night. I say, let 's get to work."

His appeal to their chivalrous instincts was unanswerable. There was only one course for them to pursue honorably, and they stoically agreed to follow it, even though it led them up and down the sides of Perry's barn.

The strongly marked emotional quality existing in every Thespian's nature was strikingly illustrated in the readiness with which the Steelson actors changed their bitter opposition to complete acquiescence. There was now no dissenting voice to Bill's diplomatic exhortation.

The star took his manager's hand.

"Thank you, Truetell," he said, "for showing us our duty."

Bill communicated the decision to the farmer, who commenced preparations for the painting by going to the door of the house and calling, "Nancy!"

A skirted counterpart of Perry minus his bristles appeared in the doorway.

"Nancy," squealed the male rustic. "I jest med a deal with these troupers to paint the barn as s'curity fer their board 'n' lodgin's."

Nancy glanced suspiciously at the actors and actresses, who had entered the yard and were grouped before the barn, gazing upon it with strange interest.

"Kin yer trest 'em while they 're a-doin' on it, Zeke?" she asked.

"We 'll keep an eye on 'em, Nancy. You git out the paint, and I 'll tend to the ledders."

Obeying the order, she re-entered the house, and shortly afterward came out staggering under the weight of a large can of brown paint. Depositing it on a bench near the barn, she turned to go back, first, however, bestowing a sharp, questioning look on the players as though she feared lest they might gratify an evil inclination to dispose of the precious liquid by drinking it or appropriating it in some other felonious manner during her absence. As a result of her second visit to the house, she brought out an armful of old brushes and three tin pails, into which she poured the paint.

"Two on ye kin dip into each pail, I reckon," said the calculating Nancy to the actors.

In the meantime Zeke had dragged to the scene two ladders of the ordinary pattern and one step-ladder, all of which wobbled dangerously when he placed them against the barn.

"Are the ladders safe, Mr. Perry?" Bill ventured to inquire.

"Safe 'nough, I reckin. Been usin' on 'em round the place fer nigh onto forty year."

"Say, mister," continued the farmer, turning to Mr. Steelson and noting his black frock coat, "I 'll lend ye a pair of jumpers so 's yer kin save them Sunday-go-to-meetin's."

"Nay, good sir," was the star's dignified reply; "I 'll play this part without a costume."

The male Steelsonites proceeded to perform the most materially artistic work of their lives, while their sisters in misery, their hearts deeply affected by the actors' decision, refused an invitation to warm themselves at the kitchen fire and set the frosty air at defiance by remaining close at hand to cheer their martyr brethren by their presence and an occasional kindly word of encouragement. Zeke and Nancy constituted themselves bosses of the job.

An inclination to take the centre of the stage, and hold it under all conditions and against all comers, is inherent in the breast of every star, male or female. Yielding to this inclination, Mr. Steelson chose for the sphere of his painting activity the highest place on the longest ladder. Bill wielded his brush beneath him, incidentally maintaining the equilibrium of the shaky support. Wentworth and Henley selected the other long ladder as the base of their operations, while Dodd perched himself on the step-ladder. Smolton, remaining on terra firma, devoted his serious attention to the lowest portions of the barn.

During the whole of the work a spirit of levity was

"'Ye Gods! Ye Gods!'"

never observable in the demeanor of the professional artists, metamorphosed for the nonce into 'prentice house-painters. They regarded their situation solely in its serious aspect, performing the common labor as if rehearsing a tragedy.

The star, in his exalted position close to the roof of the barn, experienced moments of anguish as the awful humiliation of the thing drove itself into his mind with cruel force, rendering it impossible for him to control his feelings.

During one of these agitated moments he slapped his brush against the wall with so much violence that a liberal shower of paint drops besprinkled Bill, industriously working below.

"A little easy with those extra flourishes, please, governor!" shouted the manager.

The star could no longer suppress the tumult in his soul. Raising his paint brush to heaven with a supplicating gesture he moaned: "Ye gods! Ye gods!"

There was real pathos in his invocation. There was real pathos in the picture he presented when he bravely recommenced work — his classical features, his flowing locks, his high silk hat, his long black coat, all testifying to the hideous incongruity of his employment as a common laborer for old Zeke Perry!

He was a veritable sacrifice on the altar of Art; a victim of the squalid ignorance of communities innocent

of the existence of Shakespeare; a gloomily inspiring statue personifying Hard Luck, with a rickety ladder for a pedestal!

At the end of two hours the barn was covered with paint, and the actors hastily obeyed a call to supper, which they ate with more appetite than any meal in their histrionic careers.

CHAPTER XX

COUNTING THE TIES

FROM Bassett to Weston as the crow flies is ten miles. From Bassett to Weston as the railroad runs is twelve miles.

Not possessing the crow's powers of flight nor the money insisted upon for transportation by the stony-hearted corporation controlling the only rail service between the towns, the Rupert Steelson company faced the dire alternative of accomplishing the distance on foot.

The receipts in Bassett were unthinkably meagre. More people stayed away from the performance than on any previous night in the troupe's history. When settling-up time arrived, Bill discovered that instead of any money coming in his direction he was actually in debt to the local management to the extent of nine dollars, the sum required, in excess of his portion of the receipts, to meet his share of advertising expenses.

"Will you take my I. O. U. for the nine until I come again?" he asked the local manager.

"S'pose I 'll have to. But bring a minstrel troupe along the next time. My patrons don't want the line of goods you 're trying to sell this season."

"That 's no lie, old man," coincided Bill. He glanced ruefully at the statement, showing eleven seats sold at fifty cents apiece and five at a quarter!

"My advice to all travelling managers," said the sage theatrical magnate of Bassett, "is to give the people what they want. Don't give them what you think they ought to have. Don't try to shove reed-birds down their throats when they 're hungry for corned beef. Give 'em what they want. Mark my word, Truetell, if you keep on trying to educate the public you 'll go broke, as sure as my name 's Lawton."

"If I was more broke than at present," remarked Bill, quietly, "you could n't find the pieces with a microscope."

"There you are. You 'd have a wad in your pocket if you 'd given 'em a burnt-cork show to-night. There is n't a nickel in Shakespeare. Well, good-night, Truetell. I must be going home. My wife 's not feeling well. Jack here will wait till the end of the show and lock up the theatre."

Jack, the manager's assistant, an owlish-looking youth of eighteen or twenty, grinned wisely at Bill when Lawton took his somewhat hasty departure and said:

"You 're onto him?"

"Sure thing," replied Bill. "He was afraid I was going to make a touch. I knew better than that. You could n't get money out of Lawton with burglars'

tools. I 'm sorry about his wife, but she 'll get better as soon as we leave. That reminds me, I must go and arrange for the next jump."

Bidding good-night to Jack, he went to the station — only to encounter the most obdurate station agent of the season. In vain Bill advanced all his stock arguments and several impromptu reasons why credit should be extended as far as Weston. The station agent's unchangeable reply was a negative.

When he was thoroughly convinced of the official's firmness, Bill walked to the farthermost end of the depot to hold a confidential interview with the baggage agent, whom he bribed with his last quarter to check the troupe's baggage to Weston on the night freight train. If there had been any feasible way of checking the troupe as well Bill would have concluded an arrangement then and there, but alas! on the night freight there was no caboose attached in which the artists might be stowed; and the advisability of their riding in the interior of the regular freight cars or on the roofs thereof could not, of course, be seriously entertained.

After puzzling over the ticket problem until his brain ached, Bill, just before going to bed that night, determined to execute the most brilliant coup of his life. He would absolutely ignore the station agent in the morning, and board the Weston train with the company just as confidently as if the tickets were safely nestling

in his pocket. The train would start as usual, the conductor would come along as usual, and Bill in place of handing him the necessary colored slips of pasteboard would hand him an extemporaneous plea even more highly colored than the tickets, trusting to his ready wit and resource to persuade the railroad man to allow them to finish the journey to Weston.

The astute manager, who knew and had practised every trick known to his trade, had never attempted a feat like this before, and the very fact made him reasonably sure of success. Since it would be his first attempt at buncoing a conductor, it was safe to assume the practice was not common with other travelling one-night-stand impresarios, consequently the experience would probably be a novel one for the railroad official.

In the latter event Bill was positive he could make such an impression on the inexperienced mind of the ticket-taker that a refusal would be well-nigh impossible. In any event, and entirely irrespective of the rights of railroad employees, the law of common courtesy would keep the conductor from pulling up his train and ejecting ten artists — Bill included himself in the artistic summary — four of them ladies, in the midst of a desolate, shelterless country on a freezing day in early winter! He would at least suffer them to remain aboard under compulsion until Weston was reached, and once there Bill would prepare himself for any complication that might arise.

The more he pondered this solution of his difficulty the easier it appeared. He could not restrain a smile at his lack of ingenuity in never having thought of such a simple little ruse before.

That night he shared a room at Perry's with the five actors. Stretched on the floor were three mattresses filled with hair — and other substances that conveyed the impression of cobblestones to the wearied bodies of the Steelsonites. The star and Bill reposed side by side. Dodd and the character man were sharers of the next mattress, and the heavy man and the comedian bestowed themselves on the third.

Mr. Steelson slept the sleep of the star whose earnings every week run into the thousands, and who plays the whole of every season in his own theatre on Broadway. His strenuous physical exercise of the day induced a slumber profound and refreshing.

Awakening with the proverbial lark, he arose in excellent spirits, and opened the window to allow the fresh morning air to enter the stuffy little room.

It was a bright, clear day, and the peacefulness of the rural surroundings appealed to the actor's imagination as he leaned out of the window, and made him forget the awful trials and humiliations through which he had recently passed. In fact, Mr. Steelson was fast arriving at a state of perfect tranquillity and hopefulness, when he heard the farmer's rasping voice in the yard below call out:

"Nancy!"

"Yes, Zeke," came her shrill reply from the barn.

"Nancy, hev ye' fed the chick'ns?"

"Yes, Zeke."

"Got any cornmeal left?"

" 'Bout half a pailful, I reckin."

"Wal, bring it inter the kitching and mush it up for the troupers' breakfast."

"Very wall, Zeke."

The star hastily shut the window, and returned to his place on the hard couch beside his manager.

Nine o'clock was the train's leaving time.

Before starting to the depot Bill asked the farmer, "Do we owe you anything?"

"Kin yer settle anything?" was the counter interrogation.

"I 'm afraid not."

"Then ye dun't owe me nothin'," said the rural philanthropist. "The barn looks purty slick this morning. 'Sides, I guess troupin' 's a purty derned slim-payin' business."

Zeke and Nancy, shading their eyes with their bony hands, stood at the old gate and stared after the little band of classical pilgrims as they tramped down the road. When they were out of sight the aged rustic watchers clasped their hands behind their backs, shook their heads wonderingly, and slowly scuffled back to the farm-house. Neither spoke.

A quarter of an hour after the company arrived at the station their train rumbled in. It was then five minutes after nine. The conductor alighted and walked pompously up and down the platform in all the glory of a new uniform of blue and gold. He gazed with a supercilious air at the station's surroundings, as though it was beneath his dignity to tarry there even for a few moments.

Bill noted his appearance and his actions with growing alarm. The wonderful coup planned the night before was fast losing its brilliancy in the eyes of its originator.

"All aboard. Step lively!" shouted the conductor with the gruffness of a military officer.

It was too late to back out. The coup must be executed, whatever the outcome.

The company boarded the train, the star and manager, as usual, taking seats side by side.

Mr. Steelson had partially recovered from the nervous shock he had received at the farm-house window.

"Well, Truetell," he began, "here we are again on the road, all well and hearty, and with our troubles, thank God, behind us."

"They certainly are behind us," said Bill, glancing backward with apprehension as he heard the conductor behind them calling out:

"Tickets!"

The strident voice came nearer and nearer.

"Tickets!"

The conductor was only two seats in the rear. Bill's courage, accompanied by his ready wit and resource, was leaving him in flying leaps. What he had imagined would be a simple little ruse now confronted him as the most gigantic problem of his life.

"Tickets!"

The conductor was standing at the seat holding out his hand expectantly. The time for the coup had arrived.

Springing to his feet Bill took the official familiarly by the arm, and said in a low, confidential tone:

"See here, old man. I 'm the manager of this company. I 'll fix the transportation all right with your agent at Weston. We play there to-night. If you 've got any friends there I 'll be glad to extend them courtesies and — "

The official rudely shook off Bill's familiar clasp and loudly interrupted him with —

"Have you got your tickets?"

Bill replied, "Not exactly. You see the fact is —"

"That don't go with me. Have you got the money for your fares?"

"I 'll have it in Weston, sure."

The railroad man reached for the bell-rope.

Bill grasped his arm.

"You would n't stop the train, old man? You would n't put us off?" he pleaded.

The conductor answered with a vigorous yank on the rope that quickly brought the cars to a standstill.

"Come now," was his stern command. "Get your troupe off this train and be lively about it. I'm behind time already."

Bill was not forced to the painful necessity of personally transmitting the conductor's order to the company. The merciless official had talked so loudly that not a syllable escaped the anxious ears of the artists or the less sympathetic attention of all the other passengers on the car.

As the actors and actresses collected their personal effects and filed sadly and sheepishly down the aisle to the door the tragic element in the episode did not appeal to their more fortunate fellow-travellers. In their eyes the affair was a huge stage joke which must be relished accordingly; and many a laugh grated on the suffering nerves of the players. Leaving the car, they formed themselves in a forlorn little group by the roadside. There they remained, silently gazing after the train as it puffed its way remorselessly along until it had faded into a tiny streak of smoke.

The silence was broken by the star.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said solemnly. "This is not my fault nor Mr. Truetell's. It is Fate. We are in the clutches of a power that thus far has seemed determined to crush us out of existence."

With a more courageous note in his voice he proceeded.

"But I have not abandoned hope. I feel we will yet win if we can get to Weston."

Turning to Bill he pointed significantly at the railroad ties and asked,

"Truetell, is there no other way than this?"

The manager mournfully responded,

"I 'd give five years of my life if there was."

"Ladies and gentlemen," resumed the star, "I have a presentiment that Weston will be the turning-point for us. If we fail there, I will not test your loyalty any further. Shall we make this last attempt?"

What alternative remained to these sons and daughters of Thespis? Nothing could be gained by returning to Bassett as a disrupted organization. Bassett had already shown its contempt for the classical drama and its Steelsonian exponents. If they went back, what awaited them? What roof would shelter them? How would they obtain sustenance? Artistically, they were already dead as far as Bassett was concerned. How long would they be able to maintain physical existence in that pitiless town? Food and lodgings could not be obtained without work, and Farmer Perry had no more barns to be painted. Who else would give them employment?

Nothing in this crisis, they reasoned, could be more fatal than going backward.

On the other hand, how could their interests be served by standing still on a bleak, cheerless waste, at least a mile from civilization — if indeed that term could be appropriately applied to Bassett?

They must keep moving, somehow and in some direction. Motion, in this frigid weather, was a vital necessity. The blood in their veins cried out for motion to maintain its circulation.

They must move. But whither?

That inscrutable presiding arbiter, Destiny, holding their fates in the hollow of his hand, impelled them to go onward. Before them the twin lines of steel, running on and on until they disappeared in the distant horizon, drew them forward like two interminable magnets.

They could not go back. They could not stand still. "Forward," was their inevitable watchword. The Dead March to Weston began.

There is an unwritten theatrical law that assigns a manager to his star whenever escort duty must be performed. In this instance the law chained Bill to Mr. Steelson as they trudged over the ties, but it did not prevent him from occasionally glancing around at the little Van Balken, who, under the attentive charge of the "juvenile" man, brought up the rear of the procession. What Bill saw in these backward glances did not detract from his load of misery.

How he accused himself for the depth of degradation to which the company was reduced! Had he been

a more skilful manager his companions would have been spared the terrible humiliation of walking from one town to another. An experience like this had never before fallen to the lot of a company under his direction. Why did it happen now? Did it foreshadow the culmination of his misfortunes? What had the future in store for him? Nothing but the blackest shade of despair. There was no hope for him, no gleam of hope.

Since Bill's first meeting with the Van Balken girl on that never-to-be-forgotten night in the lobby of the opera house in Branton, he had frequently been the prey of agonizing reflections on his business conditions and prospects. When the clouds hung darkest his thoughts turned to his little *protégée* for the sunshine that was never denied, and somehow his troubles had melted away. A telepathic bond of sympathy had been created between them. Unconsciously she had become the inspiration of his life.

Before to-day, whenever he had seen the girl and Dodd together on the company's marches to hotels and railway stations, he had succeeded in convincing himself that he really ought not to feel jealous of the young actor. In a certain sense he should be grateful to him for taking the place he himself was temporarily prevented from filling by his relations to Mr. Steelson. Try as he would, it had been hard even to simulate any sense of gratitude to Dodd; but, on the other hand, his trust in the unselfishness of the "juvenile" man's

motives had remained unbroken. After conquering the jealousy that had arisen in consequence of the scene at her first rehearsal, Bill had schooled himself to regard Dodd simply as a substitute for himself, playing an understudy role, as it were, and his faith in the loyalty of the girl was boundless as the ocean.

To-day it was different. His vision shadowed by the contemplation of the company's awful plight, for which he considered himself responsible, he saw everything darkly. In his first glance over his shoulder he noticed that the twain forming the rear-guard were not accepting the situation as funereally as the circumstances demanded. Dodd, carrying his companion's valise as well as his own, was relating something that must have been agreeable to her, for Bill beheld a sparkle of pleasure in her eyes. When the manager furtively looked around the second time, they were merrily calculating the distances between the railroad ties, leaping from one to another in a spirit of gaiety that roused no response in Bill's distressed soul. Again, he saw the little Van Balken manifesting an acrobatic tendency to walk on the rail, with the faithful Dodd in close — very close — attendance to guard against accident.

So good and complete an understanding appearing to exist between them, Bill resolved not to add further torture to his mind by looking at them again. Whenever the impulse to turn seized him he fought it deter-

minedly, almost savagely. Once, when the girl's light laugh rang in his ears, he yielded to the temptation, but the sight of their apparent contentment was maddening, and he quickly resumed his position with eyes directed stoically to the front. Though he would look at them no more, he could not banish her image from his mental vision. There he could see her bright and winsome; but he also saw Dodd at her side. The "juvenile" man seemed to acquire the tenure of his office, not through any secondary privilege as the manager's substitute, but because the place belonged by right of youth to him alone, and because she elected to have him remain.

"And why not?" whispered a tantalizing little demon in Bill's ear. "Why should you interfere? They are young. Let them live their lives together. You are middle-aged. Your life is behind you. She has gratitude for you,— nothing more. She has love for him,— love that was ordained for youth and ambition, not for gray hairs and a wrecked career. Perform one good act in your life and give her up to him."

"Give her up to him!" The words dinned again and again in Bill's ear, and rang in his anguished soul long after the little demon who whispered them had flown away. Must he give her up to him? Why should he keep her for himself? What had he to offer to her? The ashes of a life of failures,— a pretty gift for a maid under twenty!

All his reasonings led to one conclusion: he must give her up. He did not share the star's sanguine view of the future. Weston would take its place beside those other towns where the company had failed so lamentably. The tour would end in Weston. Another fiasco would be added to his managerial account. Convinced of his utter incapacity for business success, he would never try again. What would be the use of trying if he must give her up? And if he tried no more and gave her up besides, what else in the world remained for him? Why should he continue to try if he must give her up? Why should he continue to live?

The seed sown by the tantalizing little demon began to bear fruit. For the first time in his life Bill Truetell seriously entertained the idea of self-destruction. He debated it in all its phases; little by little, the hunted, worried expression left his face as the solemn, irrevocable purpose gradually settled upon it. Meanwhile the wearisome tramping to Weston went steadily on.

The reflections of the eminent artist at Bill's side were almost equally depressing. The bravery displayed in the exhortation to his followers before the march began was soon lost in the monotonous counting of the railroad ties. The star bore in his left hand an old carpet-covered valise that had been his faithful companion in his "legitimate" peregrinations for many years. His right hand was thrust in the breast

of his fur-trimmed coat, his head was bent low and meditatively.

The suggestion conveyed by his crushed demeanor was, "Has it come to this?" In reality the tragic thought stirring Mr. Steelson's soul to its depths was, "Has it come to this — again?"

He had believed that the acquaintanceship formed with the railroad ties in his early stage experience had been broken off for all time. Now, after a life unselfishly and industriously spent in presenting the highest creations of dramatic art to an unappreciative public, he found himself reverting to these unspeakable elementary conditions! This, then, was his reward! The world's base ingratitude to him pierced to his heart's core and he heaved a long sigh.

When another mile of ties had been counted, Mr. Steelson gravely said, "Will you do me a favor, Truetell?"

"Command me, Mr. Steelson."

"Please request Mr. Smolton to kindly discontinue his whistling."

The "heavy" man, who had been whistling a lively march with the laudable motive of keeping up the drooping spirits of the company, complied, and entered into conversation with his pedestrian partner, Henley. That professional funny man, in accordance with the habit prevailing among comedians, had never been known to relax his features while off the stage.

Under the present conditions he experienced no difficulty in preserving his wonted gravity.

The leading lady, with her husband arm in arm, were the next exhibit in the motley parade. Following them came their daughter with the corpulent Mrs. Jameson.

Naturally the last-mentioned actress experienced more physical distress from the journey than her less bulky associates. Her burden of avoirdupois soon induced a proportionate scantiness of breath. Assisted by the *ingênue*, she struggled along pluckily until more than two miles had been traversed, when, without a word of warning, she suddenly collapsed and sank between the rails, covering the space intervening.

Instantly the march halted and the players rushed to the assistance of their stricken sister artiste. Sincerest sympathy was depicted on every countenance as they bent over her prostrate form. Mrs. Jameson lay perfectly still for a few minutes, until she recovered her breath and her consciousness. Then she looked up at the saddened faces, to realize that she was the object of their tender compassion.

It was a situation that made an immediate appeal to her dramatic instinct. All her life Mrs. Jameson had coveted a leading woman's position in the centre of the stage, but her lack of talent and excess of fat had conspired to prevent her from attaining her ambition. Now her opportunity had arrived, and she determined to make the most of it.

Her features assumed a cast of heroic resolution as she feebly murmured, "Go on — and — and — leave me."

The ladies promptly burst into tears, while the men with equal promptness and unanimity cried out, "Never."

"Yes — yes — you must — leave me here," insisted the fleshy heroine of the affecting scene. She turned imploringly to the star, who straightway dropped on one knee and with great effort raised her head and shoulders.

"Mrs. Jameson," he begged, "you must live — live for my sake."

If the lady to whom he made this emotional and somewhat stagy entreaty had really been in danger of dying and had been given by the Creator of life a miraculous option on continuing her existence, she would probably have chosen to live, primarily at least, for her own sake. In the present circumstances, with no conceivable probability of a fatal outcome, she valued Mr. Steelson exclusively as a dramatic "feeder" to her scene, though, incidentally, his emotion constituted a sweet revenge for all the uncongenial parts she had been compelled to play in his support.

"Dear Mr. Steelson — dear Mr. Steelson," she gasped, "my time has arrived. But you — you must go to Weston. Do not — do not — disappoint — the audience."

"The Star Straightway Dropped on One Knee and Raised her Head"

Her appeal on behalf of an audience that might not have a numerical existence worthy the name, made a profound impression on the star; but he subdued the desire to regard himself merely as a public servant and determined to be true to the unfortunate actress.

"We remain with you," was his calm assurance. "Have no fear."

By this time Mrs. Jameson did not have the slightest fear concerning her physical well-being. The rest had completely revived her. She had recovered her strength and was in condition to continue the journey, but the part she was now playing satisfied her so much and had evidently scored such a hit with her audience she simply could not give it up.

"We must move you off the track to the roadside," said Mr. Steelson gently; "a train may come."

"Let it come," she replied; "leave me to die."

Her mind reverted to the situations in blood-and-thunder plays where the leading lady, bound to a railroad track by the villain, is always rescued in the nick of time by the hero. She had not the faintest fear of being run over, but she instantly lost her wish to continue any longer in the centre of the stage on the centre of the track when one of the actors shouted, "A train *is* coming!"

The male Steelsonites immediately lifted Mrs. Jameson and deposited her on a bank at a safe distance from the rails. Several miles down the road a

tiny speck, gradually increasing, was speeding in their direction. As it drew nearer and nearer the object resolved itself into a hand-car propelled by two railroad employees.

Bill flagged it with his handkerchief, and when a halt was made close by them, he explained the accident that had befallen the actress and asked the workmen to carry her on their car to Weston for medical assistance.

"It 's ag'in' the rules, and, besides, I 'm afraid it can't be did," said one of the men, after comparing the dimensions of Mrs. Jameson with the limited capacity of the car.

The ambitious artiste, hearing his refusal, considered the time most opportune for a repetition of "Leave me here to die," which she delivered with extra pathos for the special benefit of the two additions to her audience, who at once fell under her melodramatic spell.

There was no longer any hesitation on the part of the workmen, and the actress was accordingly assisted to the car and her amplitudinous person spread upon its surface. The railroad employees, with great difficulty, squeezed themselves into the little space remaining, and the hand-car continued on its way to Weston.

Three hours after it arrived the Steelson players counted the last tie on their Dead March.

CHAPTER XXI

DOWN AND OUT

WHEN Rupert Steelson, clad in the habiliments of the dusky Othello, made his first entrance on the stage of the Weston Opera House, it was evident that the stateliness of his classical stride had not been impaired by his ignoble pedal exercise on the railroad ties. Indeed, as a tribute to the recuperative power of this remarkable man, it should be recorded that his outward demeanor could not have been more composed that evening had he made the journey from Bassett to Weston in a private Pullman car. Self-satisfaction was stamped on his countenance, and as he looked across the footlights and beheld an audience of comfortable proportions his interior being shared his external composure.

When he came off the stage after his opening scene, Bill, who was waiting for him in the wings, said eagerly, "Did you notice the house?"

"Yes," replied the star; "it looked good to me. Is it — is it real money?"

"Straight goods all right," was Bill's joyous

response. "I took the tickets myself and very few passes came in. There must be over two hundred dollars. We have n't counted up yet. Before starting in I thought I 'd come back and tell you the good news."

"Thank you, Truetell," said the star warmly. Holding the manager's hand in an affectionate grasp he went on:

"Remember, I told the company to-day that Weston would be the turning-point for us. My presentiment has been fulfilled. We are entering a part of the country where they know Shakespeare. Fortune will shine on us henceforward. And you, Truetell, who have stood by me so faithfully, can I ever thank you enough?"

"That 's all right, governor. I told you I 'd stick."

The men shook hands again and again with hearty fervor. The good news quickly spread among the artists and there was general jubilation. Shortly afterward Bill returned to the front of the theatre to figure up the exact extent of their good luck and Mr. Steelson resumed his impersonation of the Moor.

The star, whose pride had been so cruelly outraged during the past two days, was most keenly sensitive to the change which Weston had wrought in the status of the company. As he proceeded with the performance his mind soared above the raging jealousy of Othello and dwelt with supreme complacency on the favorable turn in the tide of his affairs. He had come

into his own again. Once more he was the object of public appreciation, — not the perfunctory variety evoked from a "dead-head" audience, but the genuine article which leaves its gladdening imprint in the box-office.

The spectators noticed the genial gleam in the eyes of the Moor, — strangely incompatible with the fierceness of his character, — but they did not know that the soul of Mr. Steelson was shining through Othello's oriental orbs. They did not know it was the actor and not the noble Moor who was looking at them, burning with an impulse to take them in his arms and hold them to his grateful heart.

For Mr. Steelson's breast was surcharged with an overpowering sense of emotion. When the second act was finished and he had retired to his dressing-room, his excess of gratitude clamored for an outlet. He must offer thanks to some one; and accordingly, yielding to a sudden religious impulse, the actor fell on his knees and breathed a prayer of thanksgiving.

Bill, entering silently without giving his accustomed knock, paused abashed before the kneeling Othello.

"I beg your pardon," apologized the manager.

The star stood up and rested his hand on Bill's shoulder.

"My dear friend," he said, "I simply could n't help it. I have n't prayed in twenty years, but to-

night my heart told me to thank the God of Shakespeare for not abandoning us."

As Bill tried to speak he experienced a choking sensation and he turned his head to one side.

"Old friend," continued the star most feelingly, "I know your sensitive nature. Do not endeavor to conceal it. This affects you as deeply as myself. We both have suffered so much and we both have been loyal to Shakespeare. Do you wonder why I wanted to thank his God for rewarding our loyalty?"

Controlling his emotion Bill said gravely, "Mr. Steelson, I 'm afraid Shakespeare's God has n't got any thanks coming to him to-night."

The star took alarm at once.

"What do you mean, Truetell? Let me see the statement!"

He snatched a slip of paper from Bill's hand, glanced at it, and cried:

"Two hundred and sixty-four dollars! Why, that 's more than you expected, Truetell. What makes you look at me so sadly?"

"There 's another paper I must show you."

"Another statement?"

"Another kind of a statement, Mr. Steelson."

He handed the star a writ of attachment.

"It was served on our share of the receipts," was Bill's mournful explanation. "The sheriff took every cent that was coming to us."

Had Mr. Steelson been smitten with a stroke of paralysis the effect could not have been more disastrous. His jaw dropped and he collapsed on his seat, a paper in each hand, looking from one to the other in bewildered amazement, absolutely unable to utter a word of comment.

When he had partially recovered his power of speech he gasped:

"Who — who — is — responsible for — this — this outrage?"

"Several of our creditors pooled their claims and put up this job on us," replied Bill; "and I have n't told you all."

"Not all!" moaned the star. "Can there be any more misery for us in this world?"

"There certainly is," was Bill's subdued response. "The sheriff 's attached the scenery and he 's got body writs for you and me."

"Body writs!" echoed the startled actor.

The term was new to him, and it conveyed to his apprehensive mind the suggestion of physical torture, if not of actual capital punishment.

"Body writs," said the manager again. "Our creditors knew that in this State you can attach a man's body as well as his goods, and they 've gone the limit. If we don't get the bond for three hundred dollars that is needed, in addition to our scenery and receipts, to cover their claims, we must go to

jail. The sheriff 's waiting for us now outside your door."

The star turned to the door in a horror that was suddenly augmented when the portal was rudely thrown open by a rawboned, rawfaced countryman who bounded into the dressing-room and clapped his hand on Bill's collar.

"Ye can't lose me, Charley," he said with a diabolical leer. "I dun't pr'pose to cool my heels outside the door all night. Whar 's the Steelson feller?"

"This is Mr. Steelson," said Bill, pointing to the agonized figure of Othello in the chair.

"Ye can't fool me, old sport. That ain't Steelson. That 's a coon."

The figure of Othello arose from his seat and gazed with infinite scorn at his calumniator, meanwhile fingering unconsciously the dagger in his belt.

"Dun't ye pull that sticker on me, ye damned nigger," cried the sheriff. "If ye do I 'll fill ye so full o' holes there 'll be nothin' left for a lynchin'."

He drew an elongated pistol from his hip pocket and executed a war-dance about the dressing-room, brandishing his weapon at the star, whose feelings under these bloodthirsty conditions may possibly be imagined, but could not be pictured by anything less than a pen dipped in inspiration.

With the utmost difficulty Bill finally succeeded in calming the enraged official. His last and most effective

quiet-restorer was an offer to remove part of Othello's make-up and prove Mr. Steelson's identity. When the sheriff saw the burnt cork rubbed off he recovered his equanimity, and an earnest council was held.

Although the Weston officer of the law evinced a willingness to listen to the pleading declarations of the star and his manager, he nevertheless adhered to a stubborn determination not to take a step out of the beaten path of duty as he interpreted it. The two men were in his personal custody, where they must remain until he escorted them to the town jail, unless the necessary bail was forthcoming. The latter contingency was too improbable for serious consideration. Bill smiled sardonically at Mr. Steelson's suggestion to ask the local manager to furnish the bond, and said, "He would n't do it for his own father."

Since neither the star nor his business associate had a solitary personal acquaintance in Weston, there was absolutely nothing between them and a pair of prison cells if the sheriff could not be prevailed upon to smooth the rugged letter of the law with a little clemency.

His victims made appeal after appeal, but all to no purpose.

"Wal," he finally drawled. "Guess I 've heard all you chaps have got to offer, and now ye 'd better git ready and come 'long with me. I 'll wait h'yar, Steelson, till yer wash that coon paint off yer mug and git civilized agin."

"Do you want me to disappoint the audience!" The star, though his heart was torn by his own misfortunes, was humanely considerate of the spectators who had paid their money for an entire performance.

"The audience 's got nothin' to do with this h'yar case," declared the sheriff.

Mr. Steelson nobly espoused the cause of the people in the auditorium since they could not plead on their own behalf. He was willing, he said, to go to prison after the performance was over, but the innocent should not suffer with the guilty. The play must go on. To aid his self-sacrificing attitude he called attention to the applause in the theatre now plainly audible, testifying to the anxiety of the spectators for the long wait to conclude and the next act to begin.

This striking phase of the situation produced a certain effect on the sheriff, though it did not diminish his resolution to stick to his two prisoners until they were safely landed behind the bars. As a compromise he announced his willingness to allow the star to appear in the remaining scenes, with the express understanding, however, that he should always be in close attendance at the actor's side, even while he was on the stage. He was not aware of any incongruity in the presence of a modern Weston sheriff wandering beside the canals of the Venice of the Renaissance, nor could he appreciate the effect such an anachronism would have on the spectators.

This point was argued at length, until the officer made a further concession. He reluctantly renounced his determination to act as Othello's side partner in the play, and accepted the offer of a position in the first upper entrance, where he could watch every movement of the actor and be ready to head him off if he made a dash for liberty over the footlights. The manager, it was agreed, should never leave the side of his legal custodian. This strict guard over the two defendants was maintained during the rest of the performance.

When the tragedy of "Othello" ended, the tragedy of Steelson moved grimly on. With no means for accommodations either at the hotel or in the cheapest boarding-house in town, the members of the company were forced to the necessity of spending the night in the dressing-rooms of the theatre, utilizing their trunks for couches.

The star and the manager were not even permitted to share the scant shelter the dressing-rooms afforded. Failing to obtain the requisite security for the bond, they were escorted by the zealous sheriff to the village "lock-up," where they were unceremoniously incarcerated in two dark, damp, and dismal cells directly opposite each other on an equally dark, damp, and dismal corridor.

In each cell a rough wooden bench, the sole article of furniture, offered a resting-place; but neither of the men was in the humor for sleep.

When the jailer, after securely locking them in, had left for the night, they stood long and silently at the doors pressing their woe-begone faces against the cold bars. Their minds were flooded with misery,— misery that defied their power of speech for adequate expression. They could not see each other's faces across the Stygian gloom. They could not read each other's thoughts, but each knew he was not alone on the rack that was torturing his poor soul almost beyond human endurance.

Mr. Steelson was the first to speak. There were tears in the stricken actor's eyes and an ill-concealed sob in his voice.

"Truetell," he said.

"Yes, governor."

"Stretch out your hand, please, through the bars as far as it will go toward me."

The hand of the manager went on its mission and met the warm clasp of the star. "You are not vexed with me, Truetell?" He asked the question in a tone of almost childish entreaty.

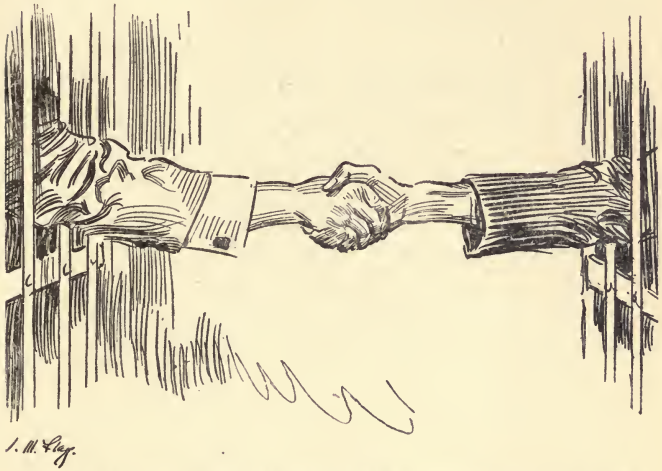
"Vexed with you, governor! Why should I be vexed with you?"

"I induced you to go with me on this tour, and here we are in this place,— this stepping-stone to hell."

Bill endeavored to reassure him with, "It is n't your fault, Mr. Steelson."

"It is my fault. I can't help blaming myself."

"You are wrong, governor," Bill spoke gently but authoritatively, giving due emphasis to each word as he slowly uttered it. "You hit the nail on the head to-day. It is n't your fault, nor my fault. It is Fate.



"The Hand of the Manager Met the Warm Clasp of the Star"

That 's exactly what it is — Fate. Our meeting in Battery Park was n't accidental. It was destined to be. Fate started this show going. Fate kept it going through all our troubles. Now Fate has closed us up without even the usual two weeks' notice."

A bitter strain showed itself in Bill's voice as his pessimistic summing up of their position continued.

"Everything that has happened on this tour has had Fate at the back of it. There was no chance about anything. Some of us never had a look-in, though we were foolish enough to think we had. Fate 's the toughest game of all to go up against. Never again for mine."

"What do you mean, Truetell?" asked the star in mingled wonderment and sympathy.

"I mean, I 'm down and out, and I know it."

"Are n't we both down and out, dear friend?"

"Not for keeps. You 'll try again, Mr. Steelson."

"And so will you, Truetell. Next time you may succeed."

Bill gave a short forced laugh, so peculiar in its significance that the star asked with earnestness:

"What makes you say so positively you won't try again?"

"I know I won't try again," was the decisive response.

"Don't take this too much to your own heart, my dear Truetell. Any man would be despondent in an awful crisis like this."

"It is n't the crisis alone with me," said Bill, with increasing bitterness. "It 's — it 's everything."

"Everything?" repeated the actor.

"Yes, everything in the world. Oh, what 's the use! What 's the use!"

He gripped the bars of the door and shook them

until the iron clanged a harsh accompaniment to his agony.

All the emotion in the star's nature went out at once and unselfishly to his friend's distress.

"Truetell!" he exclaimed. "You talk like a changed man. Take me into your confidence. Give me your hand again."

Their hands met, but Bill made no answer.

"Dear old friend," said the star, "is there no way I can help you?"

"There is no way, governor."

There was a long pause, while the actor strove in vain to pierce the intervening darkness and search his companion's countenance for a key to his strange demonstration.

At last he said: "I think, after all, what we both need is sleep. Our nerves are overwrought. To-morrow we may see a way out of our troubles. Let us try to rest. Good-night, and God bless you, Truetell!"

"Thank you, governor. Good-night."

The men shook hands again across the narrow corridor. Mr. Steelson at once laid down on his bench, and with the assistance of that elastic temperament which can accommodate itself to all conditions of life off the stage as well as on it, he soon fell asleep.

Bill did not lie down. He sat on the edge of the hard couch and buried his face in his hands, while his

brain once more gave battle to the problem he thought he had conquered that afternoon on the plodding journey to Weston.

The star's words, "To-morrow we may see a way out of our troubles," had reopened the vital question, but to-morrow seemed ages away. He must come to a final decision to-night. Perhaps, after all, there might be some way by which he could live without abandoning all hope of her. In the theatrical history of the country there had been instances of managers who had risen, almost overnight, from poverty to wealth through a sudden stroke of good fortune. It was like digging in a mine. Every season some men found the golden vein. If he should ever become one of that fortunate number, why should he not claim the girl by a right prior and paramount to anybody's else? Why should he renounce her altogether now and quit the world like a coward?

But his hesitancy, the time of night, and the pitchy darkness of his cell were all favorable conditions for another visit from his tantalizing little demon adviser.

"You decided rightly this afternoon. Give her up to him, and do not continue to live as a reminder of the gratitude she should always feel towards you. With you out of the way their lives will be free from any sentiment except the love they bear each other. Why should you wish to remain as the only blot on their happiness? In a position like yours, it is not

cowardly to quit the world. It is your irresolution that is cowardly. A brave man, seeing things as they really are, would not hesitate. Success is not for you, either in business or in love. You know it, and yet you go on throwing dust in your eyes to prevent yourself from seeing the truth. Accept the inevitable. There is no other way."

The little demon vanished. Hour after hour Bill sat in the darkness, his head buried in his hands. As the morning sun began to shine he lay down wearily on the rough bench, but sleep refused to visit his tired eyes. Mentally, he was still wide awake; and in his mind there still remained the vision, clear, distinct, and ineffaceable, of two young lives, supremely content and happy in each other's company.

CHAPTER XXII

THE IMP OF SUICIDE

THE shipwreck of the Steelson Company, and the jailing of its star and his manager, furnished the most noteworthy sensation the town of Weston had known since its almost total destruction forty years before. On that memorable occasion the thriving young municipality became the toy of a sportively disposed cyclone, which unceremoniously swept it up and carried it along until it grew tired of its plaything and dropped the ruins somewhere in a neighboring county. The few inhabitants whom the cyclone considerately left alive to tell the story transmitted some of the actual details and many imaginative embellishments to succeeding generations of Westonians. As the years passed by the event increased in importance. Every day the whittling graybeards on the sugar-barrels in the corner grocery related the occurrence to awe-stricken audiences; and every night the children, after the lights were put out, rehearsed the story to each other in hushed whispers.

Nobody in Weston, old or young, ever expected that a rival event to the cyclone would or could take

place in the same century; but when the particulars of the Steelson catastrophe were made known to the residents, they realized immediately that the unexpected had actually happened, and that another epoch was marked in the town's history.

Although Weston could not boast of a morning newspaper,— nor, for that matter, of an evening newspaper, or a weekly newspaper, the only local publication being semi-monthly,— the wonderful news spread so fast that by ten o'clock the town was talking of nothing else. The corner grocery rapidly filled to a suffocation point. Little knots of gossipers stood about the "lock-up" and stared at the windows of the captives' cells, while comments on the cause and effect of the imprisonment were as varied as they were interesting.

The most striking commentary on the occurrence was expressed by a stout female to a circle of eager feminine listeners, who learned from her the thrilling intelligence that the star had been arrested for smothering his wife in the last act of the play. In her opinion hanging was altogether too easy for him. The speaker was rapidly working herself and her hearers to a pitch of passionate resentment, which might have culminated in the storming of the jail, when she suddenly remembered her baby, which she had "left with the woman upstairs," and hurried home to discharge her maternal duties.

In general, public sentiment ranged itself on the side of the Steelsonites. Nobody, however, gave evidence of an inclination to extend anything more substantial than sympathy to the unfortunates, until the news reached the office of John Williams, a humanitarian by nature and judge of the "deestrict" court by practice. This benevolent gentleman, who had been an admiring spectator of the performance of "Othello," did not wait for the case to come before him for judicial settlement. He put on his soft felt hat, picked up his ivory-knobbed stick, and made a bee-line for the cell of Rupert Steelson.

The two men held an earnest consultation for half an hour. Then they heartily gripped one another's hands and the judge briskly walked away, his face beaming with good intentions, while the star's countenance shone with gratitude.

During the interview Bill lay on his bench in the opposite cell.

When the visitor left, the star called softly, "Truetell!"

He could see the manager's body through the bars of the door. It made no move. He called again in a louder voice. Still there was no responsive movement.

A horrible thought flashed through the star's mind, and he shouted loudly, "Truetell!"

The figure in the opposite cell yawned, stretched its legs, and rose to its feet.

"Thank God!" exclaimed Mr. Steelson.

Bill came to the cell door and sleepily inquired, "What 's the matter, governor?"

"You gave me an awful start, Truetell. I was afraid after the way you talked last night that — that something had happened."

Bill smiled curiously.

"Would it be such a frightful thing after all?" he asked.

"Frightful, indeed; especially under the new conditions."

"What do you mean?"

"I told you we might see a way out of our troubles to-day. Our salvation has come sooner than I expected."

"Our salvation?"

"Yes; Judge Williams brought it. He will save us. Think of it, Truetell!"

Bill rubbed his eyes.

"I don't understand," he said. "I 'm not wide awake yet. You see, I did n't sleep at all last night."

"I guessed as much, dear friend," said the star; "and that is why I did n't like to wake you this morning, even while the judge was here; you seemed to be resting so soundly. I gave him all the facts he wanted, and now he has gone to settle all of our troubles. He will arrange the bond for the sheriff, he will secure

transportation to New York, and meanwhile he will lodge the company in the hotel."

Bill looked at the star incredulously.

"You are joking with me."

"On my word of honor," declared the actor.

"And why does he do all this for people he never saw before?"

"There are three reasons. He is one of God's noblemen, he loves Shakespeare, and he wears one of these."

Mr. Steelson pointed to a button of a famous fraternal organization on the lapel of his coat.

"You see, Truetell," resumed the star, with enthusiasm. "There 's something in the world worth living for, after all. It can't be such a hopeless world as we think it is when it can produce a man like Judge Williams. He is a born philosopher. He counselled me not to worry. Worry, he says, does more harm than real misfortunes, and we endure the most suffering from calamities that never occur."

Bill began to take a renewed interest in life.

"Does the judge mean," he inquired, "that troubles that seem to us to be the most — the most — fatal, are often only imaginary?"

"That 's his doctrine exactly, and he contends that the experiences of men prove it to be true."

After giving the subject careful thought a new hope entered Bill's heart.

"Perhaps he 's right," he said. "Perhaps he 's right. Anyhow, I 'll gamble this once on his opinion. You 'll forget my — my little spasm of last night, won't you, Mr. Steelson?"

"Let us forget everything, Truetell, except our gratitude to Judge Williams and to the God of Shakespeare who sent him to us. I prayed to Him again last night before going to sleep, and He answered me."

The sincerity of his faith led his companion to say in all seriousness, "Governor, there may be something in this religious business. One of these days I 'll have a try at it myself."

"Don't put it off too long, Truetell. I told you last night in my dressing-room I had n't prayed for twenty years. What has been the result? Twenty years of failures and heartaches. I thought I could win without divine assistance. I was mistaken. We all need the help of an arm stronger than our own. Hereafter Shakespeare's God shall be my God, and if I live to be a hundred years old I will pray to Him every night of my life. He will aid me to succeed. I know it."

The actor, grasping the iron bars high above his head, confronted his companion with an expression so reverential and uplifting that Bill partook of the inspiration of the moment. He could feel himself regaining the ardor of his old-time, self-reliant manhood. Again he became a courageous fighter, whom defeat

after defeat could not down. His worries dwindled from gigantic mountains to insignificant molehills, across the tops of which he could see his future radiant and successful. Radiant and successful indeed, for his vision was clarified on all subjects and he could discern the truth in the relationship between his little *protégée* and the young actor. How his soul was gladdened with this revelation! He had been a blind fool in imagining that anything but mere comradeship existed between the youthful pair. She was destined for him,— for him, Bill Truetell! The little demon that whispered in his ear was an imp of suicide, instilling poison in his mind and luring him on to die by his own hand. It was all so clear to him now, he trembled at his narrow escape. At *his* narrow escape? At *their* narrow escape. What could be more horrifying than the thought of killing himself, and she really caring for him? An eternity of regret for them both! But his sense of perception was no longer distorted; he saw the light at last. Why should he not join the star in nightly prayers of thanksgiving to the God of Shakespeare!

The keeper of the jail announced Smolton. The "heavy" man rushed down the narrow corridor. Standing between the cell doors he shook hands heartily and simultaneously with the star and the manager.

"It 's all right," he panted. "Everything 's being arranged in fine shape. Judge Williams sent me to

tell you. You 'll be released in an hour, and we leave for New York in the morning. The judge told me to stop at the station and engage the eight tickets."

"The eight tickets," said Mr. Steelson. "Why, there are ten of us."

"Oh, I forgot to tell you," Smolton explained. "Dodd wired to his folks last night for money. It came this morning, and he had enough to buy tickets for himself and the Van Balken girl. They left on the noon train."

He winked mysteriously as he divulged this intelligence.

"Where did they go to?" asked the star.

"Back to New York, of course," was the reply, "and they 'll wind up in the Little Church Around the Corner before they 're many days older. Anybody with half an eye could tell that."

"By the way," Smolton went on, turning to Bill, "she wanted to see you before she left, but Dodd said they just had time to catch the train and hurried her away."

Like a drowning man clutching at a straw Bill asked in a dry, lifeless voice, "Did she say why she wished to see me?"

"No, but I suppose she wanted you to give them your blessing," was the answer of the stage villain.

The imp of suicide flew back triumphantly to the ear of its victim.

CHAPTER XXIII

MAKING HIS "LAST JUMP"

JUDGE WILLIAMS rounded out his impersonation of the good fairy role by going to the station in the morning to see the company safely off for New York. The star and Bill stood on the rear car platform as the train pulled out, waving a parting salute to their benefactor, whose genial countenance bespoke the genuine satisfaction he was deriving from the consciousness of duty well performed.

When his kindly figure was lost to view and Mr. Steelson and his manager were entering the car, the latter said:

"If you don't mind, governor, I 'll take a seat by myself. I 've had hardly any rest the last two nights, and I think I 'll try to get a little sleep as we travel."

"Just as you please, Truetell."

Selecting a place in the rear of the car, Bill crouched on the cushion, pressing his knees against the seat in front, and with his hat pulled low on his forehead and his overcoat collar turned high about his neck, he composed himself for the journey. He closed his

eyes, but he did not endeavor to seek forgetfulness in slumber. He felt he could never sleep again until

"With his Hat Pulled Low on his Forehead, and his Overcoat Collar Turned High about his Neck"

his lids veiled his weary eyes forever. Ever since the news of the departure of the little Van Balken and the young actor had been so rudely imparted to him,

Bill had acted like a man under the spell of a hypnotist. He moved and he thought mechanically. The world had lost all interest for him. He indulged in no more frantic outbursts, no more railings against the inexorable law of predestination.

The innocent man, hearing his death sentence pronounced, fills the court-room with his protestations. The criminal accepts the verdict quietly. Conscious of his guilt, he has steeled himself to meet an unfavorable decision.

Bill's preparation for the doom to which he had condemned himself commenced on the railroad ties and was finished behind the bars in the black loneliness of the Weston jail. The brief respite from his determination enjoyed before Smolton's announcement served to add greater strength to his renewed resolution. Now the die was irrevocably cast.

Only one fixed earthly desire tenanted Bill's mind. He yearned for the solitude of his little hall-bedroom. It had been the port from which he had so often started courageously and hopefully on venturesome theatrical voyages, and it had been the refuge to which he had so often returned beaten and crushed, but, till now, undismayed. It was the fitting place from which to embark on the last journey of all. Its familiar surroundings would render the departure easier.

All day he sat and waited, hardly changing his position while the train sped eastward. His com-

panions, believing him to be asleep, respected his silence.

Early in the evening the train halted at the Grand Central Station. Before the company separated, Bill forced himself to assume an appearance of cheerfulness and shook hands cordially with each member.

"Truetell," said the star, "come to my room to-morrow and we 'll plan for a fresh start. I 've been telling our people we 'll be ready to commence soon again."

"I can't meet you to-morrow, governor," replied Bill. "I don't seem to be able to make up my lost sleep. I think I 'll rest for a day or two."

"Very well. Come as soon as you can. Good-night, Truetell."

"Good-bye, governor." He squeezed the star's hand, turned quickly, and was lost in the waiting crowd about the depot.

At the lodging-house on Thirty-eighth Street his landlady, wearing a plaid shawl about her shivering shoulders, came to the door in response to his ring.

"Good-evening, Mrs. Smithson. Is my room disengaged?" he inquired somewhat anxiously.

"I 've let it to a party," she replied, "but he is n't coming till day after to-morrow."

"That 'll do very well. I 'll only use it to-night. You see, I 'm just passing through."

"You 're allus welcome, Mr. Truetell. Come in

and shet the door. It 's gettin' colder every minute." She wrapped her shawl more closely about her shoulders. "Guess you 'll want a fire made in the grate."

"No, thank you. I 'm very tired; been travelling all day and I 'm going right to bed. Please don't let anybody disturb me."

"Just as you say, Mr. Truetell. Good-night."

"Good-night, Mrs. Smithson."

The landlady paused in the hall-way and listened to her lodger's footsteps as he rapidly ascended the three flights of stairs.

"Guess business must be prosperin' with him," she said to herself. "It 's a long time since I heard him go up so spry."

Entering his room and shutting the door, Bill at once began a critical examination of the window sashes, holding his hand at the crevices where he could feel the cold air coming in. The spaces above and beneath the door also claimed his serious attention. He carefully studied the gas bracket above his bed. The general conditions were not satisfactory. He sat down to plan how to obviate the possibility of any mistake.

"There must n't be any bungling in making this jump," was his mental resolve.

He noted more critically than before the gas fixture, the bed directly beneath it, and the distance intervening. It would n't be such a simple matter, after

all. His poor brain, which had so often worried itself over the problem of remaining on earth, was now worrying itself over the surest way to leave it.

The vexatious question was soon answered, however, and a definite plan decided upon. Opening his door, Bill descended the stairs noiselessly to the street, leaving the hall door unlocked to insure a quiet return. He walked to Eighth Avenue and continued on that thoroughfare for several blocks up town until he came to "Slater's," the shop of a "property" dealer, an old acquaintance, who greeted him warmly as he entered.

"Old man," said Bill, "I want you to lend me about two feet of rubber tubing."

"Lending don't pay rent, Truetell."

"This is the last time I 'll borrow from you."

"If that 's the case, you 're going to quit the show business."

"You 've called the turn. I 'm going to quit the show business."

"Got something better, I suppose?"

"Yes, a great deal better. But I can't tell you about it now. It 's a secret."

"I 'll bet I can guess."

Bill started involuntarily. "Well, what is it?" he asked.

"You 're working on a new lighting effect for drop lamps," said Slater knowingly.

"You 're pretty wise."

"Wisdom 's my long suit. Yes; I 'll lend you the tubing, and I hope it will help you to get something good. You 've been against a lot of tough luck, Truetell, and now it 's up to you to make a strike. Turn the laugh on the fellows that are knocking you all the time. Show them you 're not a dead one."

Bill smiled faintly. "I 'm not a dead one — yet."

Slater rummaged about under his counter and reappeared with the tubing, which he handed to Bill.

"Thanks very much. By the way, sorry to trouble you further, but will you wrap it up for me,— in an old newspaper or anything you 've got handy?"

"You 're getting mighty particular. The new scheme must look pretty good to you. Well, here you are."

Bill took the paper-covered parcel that Slater prepared and shoved it in his overcoat pocket.

"Before you go, Mr. Inventor," continued the property dealer, "I suppose you 'll condescend to tell me when you 'll return the tubing."

"I 'll send it to you to-morrow, sure."

"Bring it around yourself. I want to talk with you again about your new pipe dream."

"I will if possible. Anyhow, I 'll see that you get it all right. Good-night, old man."

The rest must be done quickly. Nothing now should prevent a swift and sure fulfilment of his purpose.

Five or six minutes' rapid walking down the avenue brought him to Thirty-eighth Street.

As he was turning the corner he received a shock of delight that held him transfixed and set his heart beating a joyous tattoo in his breast. A girl with the familiar figure of the little Van Balken was walking down Thirty-eighth Street, about half a block distant. She was approaching him in the timid, shrinking fashion that had captivated him from the beginning. The sight thrilled him as he was never thrilled before. He could cry aloud in his exultation. Dodd was not with her. She was alone and coming to him!

Bill waited for her as the soldier dying of fever waits for the cup of cold water to be held to his lips. The figure came nearer and he saw her features. The cup fell to the ground, and was shattered. It was not his *protégée*. It was a faded derelict of the streets.

"Good-evening, dearie," said the girl, a sickly smile outlining itself on her painted face. "Be you waitin' for me?"

Bill shuddered and hastened on to his lodging-house. Regaining his room, he locked the door and set to work on the final details without a moment's hesitation. Undoing the parcel, he tore the paper cover into strips, which he carefully stuffed into the crevices about the window and door.

An examination of the gas-burner showed that the connection with the tubing would be a simple process,

but on comparing the length of the rubber pipe with the distance between the bracket and the bed, Bill discovered he had made a miscalculation. The lower end of the tubing fell a foot short of the pillow. He could not lengthen the rubber, but he could and did raise the pillow to the requisite height by rolling up his overcoat and placing it underneath.

He was about to extinguish the light and attach the tubing, when he remembered his promise to Slater. Going to the table he sat down and wrote the following:

MRS. SMITHSON,— Sorry to cause you this trouble. Please notify the police. There will be no need of a coroner's services, for this is a plain case. Kindly return the rubber tubing to Slater's, Eighth Avenue. This is important. W. TRUETELL.

Standing up, he paused for a moment before the little discolored mirror. To his surprise the image he saw reflected was peaceful and resigned. There were no furrows on its forehead, and the calm face bore no sign of disapproval of the step he was about to take.

Putting out the light, Bill carefully affixed the rubber pipe to the burner. Then, having turned on the gas to its full strength he reclined on the bed and applied the end of the tube to his lips, inhaling deeply and eagerly.

A slight giddiness was his first sensation. This was succeeded by a delicious sense of languor. Soon he grew cold and motionless.

CHAPTER XXIV

BILL IN HEAVEN

THE spirit of Bill Truetell, released from its earthly tenement, took wing, and, leaving the little hall-bedroom, flew higher and higher, passing the clouds and the stars into the uttermost regions of ethereal space.

The journey lasted several centuries. At least, that was the impression conveyed to the remnant of subconsciousness possessed by the late manager and present aerial tourist. To him it seemed as if the voyage would be endless. Bereft of all physical sensation, he had become an intangible entity whirling with incredible velocity in a certain definite course, the destination of which Bill was not yet able to anticipate through any process of spiritualized reasoning.

"I'm dead, all right," was his subconscious idea; "but where am I booked?"

During his mundane existence Bill had never professed any religious creed. He had never seriously meditated on the punishments or rewards of an afterlife. His indifference regarding the hereafter was not due to any anti-religious sentiment inborn, or acquired.

It was caused principally by his lack of leisure. Throughout his life he had been so busy undergoing the penalties of non-success that he had had no time to concern himself with the punishments of another world. The punishments of the mortal world engrossed his entire attention. If forced to a confession of faith on this particular point, he would probably have advanced the belief that if hell existed anywhere it was on earth in the show business. And if there were any rewards in heaven for people who suffered on earth he was entitled by every right to a generous share. But such joys were altogether too remote for his human consideration.

When he turned on the gas in his hall-bedroom and took the rubber tubing between his lips he had no expectation whatever of an after existence. He firmly believed he was putting an end to everything present or future in the life of Bill Truetell.

Now he knew his mistake. He had a soul. It was immortal. It was winging its flight either to Paradise or to Hades.

As the centuries rolled on his subconsciousness developed in perspicacity. He realized the question of reward or punishment in the hereafter must be treated with all seriousness, especially since the hereafter had become the present. The matter was now purely personal and would soon be decided. What would be the verdict in his case?

Bill recalled the doctrine that the determination of eternal pain or happiness depended altogether on the conduct of a person on earth. Immediately, his mortal life unfolded itself like a book before his spiritual vision. The record was not reassuring. If he could live his life over again! Repentance came too late. Judgment had been passed on him according to his earthly deserts. He was speeding to one of two goals, powerless to alter the direction. He must await his fate in awful apprehension. Meanwhile the centuries continued their ceaseless rolling.

After countless ages had elapsed, Bill's spirit, keenly alert and eager for any sign indicative of its fate, became slowly conscious of the sensation of music. A clear, male voice appeared to be singing thousands of miles away. Gradually the notes became more audible, until he could distinguish the words:

"We shall gather at the river,
The beautiful, beautiful river."

"That sounds good to me," thought the late showman. "Perhaps I 'm headed for the right place after all."

The hymn ceased, and simultaneously Bill's spirit stopped flying. What had happened? Which goal had he reached? If he could only open his eyes and see! His will power was ready for the effort, but his optical sense did not respond. Summoning all his strength

he tried again. This time the exertion resulted in a slight pain. His eyelids fluttered a little apart. What he saw filled his subconsciousness with transport. Although his vision was blurred and indistinct, the impression upon it was of general whiteness. Above him and on either side the effect was of pure white, and consequently in perfect accord with all his preconceived notions of the color of the celestial regions.

As if to add verisimilitude to the conception the clear-voiced singer intoned:

"We 'll have peace on that Beautiful Shore."

"It 's Heaven for mine!" was Bill's ecstatic conclusion.

While he was revelling in this blissful contemplation a figure bent over him. It was garbed entirely in blue, dotted here and there with circular golden spots.

"One of the angels," soliloquized the happy shade of the late manager of the Steelson Company.

As the figure bent lower and Bill's vision grew clearer, the garb of blue resolved itself into a uniform, and the circular golden spots into brass buttons.

"I 've made a horrible mistake," quaked Bill. "They don't need policemen in Heaven. I 've landed at the other end of the route!"

"You vas alive, yes?" said the apparition in blue, with an unmistakably German accent.

Bill muttered feebly, "Where am I?"

"You vas in the emergencies vard of Bellevue hosbidals."

"How did I get here?" he groaned.

"You vas carried here last night. Folks in your house smelt de gas yoost in dime. De captain sent me dis morning to see how you vas. If you get bedder you'll be tried for addembding suicides."

Enfeebled by the effects of the gas and his long spiritual journey, Bill's mind could not grasp the entire situation at once. To overcome one delusion he looked again at the white ceiling and walls that he had just mistaken for celestial brightness. Another important element remained to be explained.

"Officer," he asked, "has anybody about here been doing a musical turn?"

The policeman grinned to the capacity of his full-moon face.

"Dat vas a Salvationer in the next vards. He got mixed up mit an oddomobeels, and he has vat you call deliriums in his brains."

"Thank you," Bill wearily responded. He closed his eyes and straightway became the prey of torturing reflections. Why was he not allowed to die? Why was he condemned to renew his life's struggles? There was no hope for him in life. His existence had been one long, continuous failure, and his attempt to put an end to it had been a failure also! Unsuccessful in living, he had been unsuccessful in dying. He

would give up trying to live, and persist in his attempts to die until the end really came. Next time he would make surer work of it. A leap from a ferry-boat on a dark night, and all would soon be over. If he had only done so this time he would have been spared this miserable fiasco. If he —

"A visidor for you," announced the policeman.

Bill opened his eyes, and saw — the little Van Balken. She held a tiny handkerchief to her eyes.

"Oh — oh — Mr. Truetell," she sobbed. "How could you? I — I read it — in the paper. How could you, Mr. Truetell?"

"Don't cry, kid."

"I — I — can't help it. I've been crying ever since — ever since I read that terrible thing. You won't ever think of doing it again, Mr. Truetell, will you? Promise me you won't; promise me!"

"Kid," Bill said faintly, "I did n't think you cared."

"Cared! Cared!" she cried with increasing vehemence. "This is how I care for you, Mr. Truetell!" She dropped to her knees by his bedside, flung her arms about his neck, and kissed his parched lips.

"This is how," she repeated, kissing him again, "and this, and this, and this!"

Heaven at last opened its pearly gates for Bill Truetell. All the rewards of Paradise were spread before him. But the sight dazzled him. He could not credit his senses. Inured to disappointments, he could not

"She Dropped to her Knees by his Bedside"

realize that this transcendent happiness was really within his grasp. Even with the girl's soft arms about him, her warm lips awakening the blood in his own, a skeptical thought took possession of his mind and constrained him to say, "Kid, is this straight?"

For answer she lifted up her eyes to his, and he saw truth and love gleaming through her tears.

"You 're going to get better now?" she said, half interrogatively, and altogether sweetly.

"From this moment," he replied with animation, his ambition returning with one bound. "I 'm going to begin work right away. And my first contract will be with you."

"For this season?" lisped the innocent little Van Balken.

"For life, kid."

"Ready to sign now," she made answer, giving him another kiss to seal the bargain.

"But," said the careful business man, "what about Dodd?"

She patted his fevered brow in a pretty, motherly way as she soothingly quoted one of his own favorite admonitions.

"Forget him, Mr. Truetell."

"Good girl!" ejaculated Bill, drawing her closer, "this changes my luck."

THE END

THIS BOOK IS DUE ON THE LAST DATE
STAMPED BELOW

RENEWED BOOKS ARE SUBJECT TO IMMEDIATE
RECALL

LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, DAVIS

Book Slip—25*m*-6,'66 (G3855s4) 458

№ 562246

PS3503
R476
B5

Brennan, G.H.
Bill Truetell,
a story of theatrical life.

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
DAVIS